

A Learning Community in Progress

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Abstract:

In this article I venture to give a survey of the theological work being done over more than a decade at the Dutch Baptist Seminary, in particular by its academic Chair at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam, and to give a brief description of its own academic finger prints, if any. The question if there actually is a Dutch proprium remains unsolved, as it should be, because this is for our peers from other theological institutions to decide. However, some leads seem to be apparent.

Keywords:

Baptists; the Netherlands; theology; Dutch Baptist Seminary; identity; James Wm McClendon Chair

Introduction

Three years ago, this article was projected to become an extended 'Forschungsbericht' of the Baptist Chair at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. However, since the research focus on mapping Baptist identity was still in progress, the text was never finished. The present article is an abridgement of the original, and functions as an overview, more in particular as a presentation with the focal point on the many-sidedness of the Dutch Baptist Seminary as a learning community in progress. The versatility of Dutch research is not just to be looked upon as coincidence, but as strategy, or even better, as methodology. Apparently, the incitement to seek support from peers, to cooperate, and to do interdisciplinary work somehow fits naturally into the Dutch way of doing academic work. In explaining this proficiency, let me give some background information.

I grew up in the 1960s and 70s in the Netherlands, in an ordinary protestant family in the east side of the city of Haarlem, just a couple of miles from Amsterdam. My parents taught me to live, behave and believe like the average Dutch civilian did, and this was altogether modest and quite sober. Dutch culture more or less started around the beginning of the Christian era, with living and surviving in a delta-area, the port to Europe, and ever since the Dutch have valued the qualities of cooperation and modesty. You just cannot think you are better than someone else, and subsequently have to beg for help from others because your house or cattle are in danger of drowning. For that matter any typology of the Dutch national character should include characteristics like modesty, communal cohesion, and non-heroism.

Generally speaking, Dutch people display a deep suspicion toward heroism, mystifications, self-aggrandisement, self-gratification, and in particular toward the powers that do so. Dutch history shows the steely resolve of the people in de-mystifying the powers and the persons involved, with the intention of bringing back the power to the community where it belongs, that is, with those who live in the polder or uphill. Within the natural context of this cohabitation — the seas, the rivers, the polders, the peat-moors, the sandy plains, and its people — fresh varieties of theory and convictions emerged which cultivated new perspectives on the coherence between the realm of God, the Church, and the State (Calvinism), on the sphere of sovereignty and the right for each societal sphere to develop inherent responsibilities and jurisdiction (Abraham Kuyper, neo-Calvinism), and on the radical downgrading of the State and the established churches (Menno Simons, anabaptism).¹

Playing the Anti-hero

Among others, the name of Hendrikus Berkhof comes to mind here, because it implies full engagement with the conundrums evolving from the uneasiness between the power of Christ and the powers that be. The Dutch theologian Berkhof was one of the first to articulate the Pauline notion of ‘powers and principalities’, and to foster its digestion within

¹ Cf. Cornelis van Duin, *Het bijbels ongelooft: Een radicaal-doperse theologie van het Oude Testament* (Delft: Eburon, 2010).

the work of theology.² According to Berkhof the ‘powers’ commonly refer to forceful non-personal systems which rule and direct human society. Most of these powers operate as recurring forces tending to take control of large segments of society. Categories such as ‘world’ (*kosmos*) and ‘Zeitgeist’ (*stoicheia*) and ‘powers of the world’ (*kosmokratores*) often indicate systems that dominate by modes and methods deceiving humanity, subjecting them, controlling, exploiting, and dehumanising them. Coming out of the Second World War, and having experienced Nazi incarceration himself, Berkhof accurately sensed upcoming dark forces, sorts of machineries, prone to drag people of faith back to oblivion and secularisation.³ Consequentially, he noted that the resulting vacuum of the post-war rebound, due to the evaporation of the Christian faith, would breathe heroisms and mystifications of the rule of power. New forms of paganism are bound to arise from the ashes of old paganism.

Another well-known Dutch theologian, Kornelis Heiko Miskotte, persistently emphasised during the decades after the Second World War that in serving the God of Israel, Christians should deter from attributing God’s Name to new Molochs applauded for by the aristocracy. In terms of spiritual typology, paganism fascinates the average citizen living in the lower Rhine-Delta more than Christianity.⁴ Therefore Miskotte, more or less prophetically, addressed the shared awareness within collective Dutch memory, that Christian morals do not match with the adoration of state, powers, and the powerful. Glorifications of presidents, the supreme, and elite, as can be found in the wake of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, should not occur in the lower Rhine-Delta.

So, if there is a Dutch Christian identity at all, it is very hesitant and reluctant about governments becoming powerhouses. All too often they derail into institutions of self-interest and self-indulgence, more

² See Hendrikus Berkhof, *De kerk en de keizer: Een studie over het ontstaan van de Byzantinistische en de theocratische staatsgedachte in de vierde eeuw* (Amsterdam: Holland, 1946), and *Christus en de machten* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1952).

³ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011); originally published in French, *La subversion du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

⁴ Cf. Henk Bakker, “‘Het evangelie aan de Bataven:’ Evangelisatie in Nederland na de millenniumwende”, *Soteria*, 23, no. 2 (2006), 57–67.

concerned with their own positions than with the welfare of the people. Part of the reputed Dutch disposition may be captured with the denominator of the anti-hero. The Dutch love to play the role of anti-hero, this fuels their sense of humour. They laugh about heroes who fail, when some anti-hero outsmarts them. If any person could be called 'hero', it should be Hans Brinker or Anne Frank, who were rather young and did not perform extravaganzas to be remembered by the multitudes. Anne just wrote her diary, and Hans just put his finger in the dike ('the chubby little finger').⁵ The Dutch anti-hero exhibits a no-nonsense attitude, does not look up to others just because they are somewhere up the ladder of a hierarchy.

Research Review

The Dutch inclination of playing the anti-hero definitely affects the way Dutch Baptists have been accustomed to doing theology. Their sensemaking operates on the other side of mythmaking, is strongly dedicated to the art of fact finding (*data bruta*), and for that matter also to establishing a community of equals to lean back to. This is how the Dutch Baptist Seminary came into existence (1958), first in cooperation with the University of Utrecht (1970), and then with Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam (2009). From 2009 on, Baptist House called for a 'kenniskring' (BrainChain) to keep up with Baptists (or baptists) who are being academically trained, and who publish in the field of theology or close to the field of theology.⁶ At this moment around twenty members participate twice a year, and the meetings are always stimulating and vibrant. The Baptist Seminary has chosen to make 'onderzoekszin' (academic inquisitiveness) one of the core values of its vocation. It works with a quadrant tying four essential corners together: (1) students,

⁵ The story of the little boy saving the city of Haarlem and the polders there is altogether fiction, see Mary Mapes Dodge, *Hans Brinker of De zilveren schaatsen* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2005; originally published as *Hans Brinker or The Silver Skates: A Story of life in Holland*, 1865), pp. 312–15.

⁶ The Baptist House in Amsterdam is the actual location hosting the Dutch Baptist Seminary, the International Baptist Theological Study-Centre, the European Baptist Federation, and the administration office of the Dutch Baptist Union.

(2) churches, (3) teachers, (4) inquisitiveness. Love for research is pivotal for its cohesiveness.⁷

From there the Baptist Seminary has developed its own concept of interpretive leadership within the Dutch ecclesial context. As stated above, the idea of leadership in the Netherlands is a tricky one, because what type of leadership fits this particular context? We think that interpretive inquisitiveness adds up to interpretive leadership which cannot go unnoticed. Good church leaders know how to interpret in responsible ways. They know their times, themselves, their churches, and the Bible, and they know how to make these meaningfully conversant with one another. In the pursuit of this vision the Baptist Seminary opts for a critical historical-hermeneutical approach to the work of Christian theology and its sources. The phenomenon of revelation is foremost historically rooted, as has been the core conviction of Dutch theology for half a millennium and more.

Over a decade a variety of research has been conducted by the Baptist Seminary (2009–2021), in particular by the VU-Chair, which today is named *The James Wm McClendon Chair*. I will introduce these three fields of research now, and succinctly elaborate on them in the coming paragraphs. The design of these paragraphs is not oriented toward analysis, but to observation, and to calling attention to the Dutch Seminary's commitment to academic many-sidedness and synergy.

1. Baptist Life and Identity (Mapping Baptist Identity), conducted by the research group Baptist Identity in The Netherlands (OKBI, 2013–2018).
2. Evangelical Theology and Identity in The Netherlands, first conducted by the Centre for Evangelical and Reformation Theology (2005–2015), then by the Herman Bavinck Centre for Reformed and Evangelical Theology (2015–), and recently by the research group Evangelical Protestants on belonging, believing, and identity in Evangelical-Protestant communities in The Netherlands (2018–).
3. Leadership by Interpretation (or interpretive leadership).

⁷ With this in mind the Baptist Seminary also started the *Baptistica Reeks*, a series of accessible booklets on subjects and discussions relevant to local churches.

- a. The research group Church leadership and Ordained Ministry for the coming decades (VU University Amsterdam, 2011–2020, initiated by Eddy van der Borgh).
- b. The research group Inclusion and Exclusion (VU University Amsterdam, 2020–, initiated by Bernhard Reitsma).
- c. The research group Martyrs and Martyrdom in Five World Religions (VU University Amsterdam, 2017–2021, initiated by Henk Bakker).
- d. The research group Mystagogy and the Early Church, conducted by the Centre for Patristic Research at the VU University Amsterdam and Tilburg School of Catholic Theology (2008–, initiated by Paul van Geest)
- e. The research group B/baptists and Sacramentalism, conducted by an international network of free church scholars based at different universities and colleges (2020–).

Mapping Baptist Identity in The Netherlands

In order to be able to trace some possible ‘fingerprints’ of a Dutch way of doing theology, I now take a close look at a variety of doctoral theses, master’s dissertations, bachelor’s dissertations, and other publications, which not only give the scope and breadth of the theological enquiries of the seminary, but may also provide some leads and hints for making any sense of a Dutch ‘proprium’.

Again, I wish to underline that the following paragraphs will merely offer an overview of the research coordinated and registered with researchers linked (or to be linked) to the Dutch Baptist Seminary. In the closing article of this compilation more theological discrimination and interpretation will be given by Regien Smit and myself. In advance, I also wish to value the Baptist Seminary as a learning community delivering parameters for finding personal and communal academic focus, which generally results in a critical heuristic with a certain

emphasis on the act of finding and learning, not to say on the adventure of finding, personally and together.

During the years 2013 to 2018 the research group Baptist Identity in The Netherlands (OKBI) operated as a platform of fellow experts, conversant with different types of churches,⁸ whose intention it was to initiate, conduct and supervise a variety of academic research on Baptist life, whether empirical, historical or theological.⁹ For the study of Baptist life, we adopted the convictional approach of James Wm McClendon, since his starting point is with storied convictions, as they are communally preserved, passed on, interpreted and identified with.¹⁰ Every convictive community carries with it identity stories in correlation with its identity narratives (scripture and normative traditions), durably expressed in powerful practices, such as prayer, proclamation, singing, baptism, the Lord's supper. Methodologically, this approach is to be situated in the field of descriptive theology, a subset of practical theology, and postulates the hypothesis that in any thick description theology plays an important role. Accordingly, theological research has no fixed methodological starting point or closing point. There is no Archimedean spot, a *pou stô*, from where the theologian may stand firm, move the world and explore. Rather, as Stanley Hauerwas maintains, 'you always begin in the middle'. There are no real prolegomena for the work of theology: 'It is performance all the way down.'¹¹

⁸ See on the project Mapping Baptist Identity the inaugural 'Munificent Church: The Drama of Tangible Ecclesial Transformation', *The American Baptist Quarterly*, 31, no. 4 (2012), 366–378. OKBI consisted of permanent members Eduard Groen, Teun van der Leer, Hans Riphagen, Arjen Stellingwerf (secretary), Henk Bakker (chair), and short-term members Jack Barentsen, Miranda Klaver, Teus van de Lagemaat, Stefan Paas, Sake Stoppels.

⁹ Cf. Henk Bakker, 'Mapping Dutch Baptist Identity', in *Zo zijn onze manieren! In gesprek over gemeentetheologie*, ed. by Teun van der Leer, Baptistica Reeks (Barneveld: Unie van Baptistengemeenten, 2009), pp. 23–31.

¹⁰ See David McMillan, *Convictions, Conflict and Moral Reasoning: The Contribution of the Concept of Convictions in Understanding Moral Reasoning in the Context of Conflict, Illustrated by a Case Study of Four Groups of Christians in Northern Ireland*, Amsterdam Studies in Baptist and Mennonite Theology, 1 (Kampen: Sumnum, 2021). Cf. Henk Bakker and Daniël Drost, eds, *Andersom – een introductie in de theologie van James Wm. McClendon* (Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, Veenendaal: WoodyDesign, 2014).

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 24.

Still, practical theology regularly begins with empirical descriptions of elements of lived religion, with a view to rendering explicit vital theological convictions. However, as a work of descriptive theology, thick descriptions may not automatically be conceived as inductive explorations, they may be apprehended as deductive documents as well. For this reason, Charles Marsh distinguishes between lived theology and lived religion. Examining lived religion, scholars explore and investigate practices, beliefs, and objects with a view to understanding religion, whereas lived theology is studied by analysing human experiences of God's presence as purported in certain practices and beliefs. Accordingly, the research domain of lived theology duly reckons with the possibility and potentiality of God being present in human experiences.¹²

Hence all reflection on the church, ethnographic as well as sociological insights amongst others, may legitimately be tied to theological considerations, Nicholas Healy propounds.¹³ No matter how much interdisciplinary science is involved, ecclesial studies will always display demonstrable theodramatic perspectives.¹⁴ The church needs these tools to study and critique its own life and meaning, on account of which, doing lived theology becomes also an exercise in prophetic ecclesiology.¹⁵

I now offer a brief survey of most of the research enlisted by OKBI (2013–2018), first by looking at doctoral work, then moving to master's research conflating with some bachelor's research.

1. At the fifteenth OKBI meeting, on 14 October 2016 at the VU University Amsterdam, five Baptist doctoral students were asked to present some critical reflections, informed by their own research, as an address to the Dutch Baptist Federation in light of its present and

¹² See Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds, *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1–20 (pp. 6–9).

¹³ Cf. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 176.

¹⁴ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, pp. 76, 154, 165, 166, 168, 175–179.

¹⁵ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, pp. 52–54.

future.¹⁶ Teun van der Leer steeped himself in meticulous analysis of eighteen Believers' Church Conferences (from 1955–2017),¹⁷ and responded with pointing to some of the core values of the Believers' Church, such as its covenantal demeanour, its theology of baptism, and from there raised a piercing question: could it be that the issue of catholicity among Baptists and baptistic communities is more central for its shared identity than usually recognised? We like to think that our communities are thick and covenantal, and that they represent a high quality of the body of Christ, but how can this be if we define ourselves as somehow isolated from the body of Christ represented in other modalities?

Maybe the answer is to be found in the puzzling and problematic relation Baptists tend to have with other churches. Our lack of catholicity is *no lens volens* constitutive of some distinctives of the Baptist identity.¹⁸ At the first Believers' Church Conference in Louisville, Kentucky in 1967,¹⁹ the concept of the Believer's Church was at the heart of the matter, and was summarised as follows:

The visible community is the organ of witness to the surrounding society. As discerning community it is led by the Holy Spirit to develop criteria of moral judgment in social issues. As forgiven community she brings to bear the qualities of compassion and love. As paradigmatic community the church is the pilot agency in the building of new patterns of social relations. The democratization of the power structures of society and the development of welfare concerns are pioneered and preached by the covenanted community. (Appendix I art. IV.B)²⁰

The conference was considered a landmark in the development of the Believers' Church tradition. The notion of the visible church became vital in Anabaptist and Baptist thinking. In fact, it was a battle term (*'Kampfswort'*) stemming from early reformation time, and was

¹⁶ Present were Daniël Drost, Yme Horjus, Teun van der Leer, Hans Riphagen, and Kirsten Timmer.

¹⁷ See forthcoming, Teun van der Leer, 'Looking in the Other Direction: The Story of the Believers Church Tradition' (doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam).

¹⁸ Cf. Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anthony R. Cross, *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 21 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

¹⁹ The first attempt at a Believers' Church Conference was projected in 1964 in Amsterdam, yet was cancelled due to 'insufficient interest'.

²⁰ James Leo Garrett, Jr, ed., *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1969), p. 321.

connected with the practice of discernment.²¹ At the same conference, J. Lawrence Burkholder typified the church as a prophetic community, which is a discerning community, enabling each individual to understand the will of God for today.²² Every believer participated in the full ministry of Christ, and by consequence should be deemed a priest, a prophet, or a preacher.²³ Even at the pre-conference, at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary Chicago in 1955, all agreed on the heartfelt statement, ‘We come with open minds desiring to find the mind and will of God.’²⁴ So, if Baptist churches can fairly well be described as discerning churches, this characteristic may be leading in our effort to give a descriptive survey of lived Baptist theology and identity.²⁵ However, it is precisely the high idealism going along with the discerning quality, which all too often takes churches captive into an attitude of moral superiority, and from there into cocoons of ‘splendid isolation’.²⁶

²¹ Garrett, *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, p. 278.

²² Garrett, *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, p. 176.

²³ App. I art. I.C; App. I art. II; App. II art. 6.c. in Garrett, *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, ‘Appendices’.

²⁴ *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers’ Church Held at Mennonite Biblical Seminary Chicago, Illinois, August 23–25, 1955* (Newton: The Mennonite Press, 1956), pp. 224–225. However, there is no direct connection between the 1955 Mennonite conference and the later series of Believers’ Church Conferences.

²⁵ Cf. Henk Bakker, “‘We are all equal’ (Omnes sumus aequales): A Critical Assessment of Early Protestant Ministerial Thinking”, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 44, no. 3 (2017), 353–76; ‘Towards a Catholic Understanding of Baptist Congregationalism: Conciliar Power and Authority’, *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 5 (2011), 159–83; and *Gunnende Kerk: Kompas voor een waardegestuurde gemeente ethiek* (Kampen: Brevier, 2012). See also Henk Bakker, Erik Groeneveld, and Yme Horjus, *Kunnende kerk: Gemeente-ethiek in de praktijk* (Kampen: Brevier, 2020), and Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo, ed., *Samen ontdekken! De uitdaging van de vergader(en)de gemeente: samen de wil van Christus onderscheiden*, Baptistica Reeks (Barneveld: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2016), pp. 18–33.

²⁶ Cf. forthcoming Hruaia Kiangte, ‘A Historical Study on the Development of the “Baptist Distinctive Doctrines” and their Implications to the Baptists’ Participation towards the Ecumenical Movement: A Search for Problems and Relevant Understandings with Special Reference to the Baptist Churches in India’ (doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) and the master’s research of Koert Baas on the ecumenical agenda between Baptists and the Catholic Church. Cf. to be published, Henk Bakker, ‘Towards Free Church Ecumenical Theology: On the Pre-Given Vocation to Listen’, in *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (an issue on ‘apostolic succession and ecumenical theology’).

2. At the same OKBI meeting Yme Horjus reported on his investigations into ecclesial discipline within Dutch Baptist Churches.²⁷ The compelling question he raised with a view to future Baptist life was about obedience to Christ. If Baptists wish to live as followers of Christ, they have to stick to the practice of mutual correction and accountability. Horjus observes an openness and readiness among Baptist churches to discuss ‘bottom-up’ common values.

3. In the same flow of thought Kirsten Timmer added her critical question on the idea of ‘consensus’ within baptistic circles. Timmer’s research comprises a critical historical analysis of earliest Baptist correspondence between Mennonites and English refugees. Her findings prove the fact that Mennonite communities and English separatists drew up quite loose confessions in order to verify mutual consensus between communities and individuals.²⁸

4. Daniël Drost focused his research on specific Jewish orientations in Free Church ecclesiology as articulated by John Howard Yoder.²⁹ He strongly points to the necessity for Baptist churches in a post-Christendom setting to consider themselves diaspora churches and to embody the Gospel of Christ without craving for power. Can Baptist churches be merely present without heralding their expectations, trophies and successes in the spiritual realm, and let suffering and failure also be part of their spiritual harvest? Moreover, do Baptist churches have enough capacity in their theological DNA to let this happen and adjust themselves to (rapidly) changing circumstances, and not mourn over what has passed, but face up to new situations and accommodate

²⁷ Yme Horjus defended his thesis at Kampen Theological University on 11 December 2020: *Elkaar aanspreken: Is er nog draagvlak voor tegenspraak, correctie en tucht in de kerk?* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2020).

²⁸ The provisional title of Kirsten Timmer’s research is ‘An Examination of Baptist Origins in the Context of Baptist and Mennonite Relationships in the Early Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic’ (ongoing doctoral research, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam). See also regarding Baptist roots in Amsterdam, Olof H. de Vries, *Gelovig gedoopt – 400 jaar baptisme, 150 jaar in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), Henk Bakker, *De Weg van het massende water: Op zoek naar de wortels van het baptisme* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2008), and Henk Bakker, ‘Baptists in Amsterdam’, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 43 (2009), 229–34.

²⁹ Daniël Drost defended his doctoral thesis at the VU University Amsterdam on 12 November 2019: ‘Diaspora as Mission: John Howard Yoder, Jeremiah 29 and the Shape and Mission of the Church.’

their identity to new allies? Here again, Baptists may stumble over their high ideals pre-given with their propensity to ‘discern’ and to define themselves away from others. Baptists’ core strength apparently has a flipside. Strong in mutual discernment and the testing of spirits, Baptists tend (1) to disqualify possible allies on the grounds of superficial prejudice, and (2) to get stuck in tenacity and walking in circles.

5. Moreover, the question raised by Hans Riphagen in his academic analysis of Christian neighbour-ship makes this weakness all the more explicit.³⁰ Riphagen summons us to look carefully at practices and not to be judgemental at first sight when Baptists try to build bridges. Do Baptist churches succeed in religious ‘place making’? How do they look at the theological ‘other’, and how does otherness construct (or deconstruct) identity?³¹

6. Critical questions such as these also pertain to issues of ecclesial office and types of leadership. Jan Martijn Abrahamse wrote his doctoral research on the primary sources of Robert Browne’s theology (c. 1550–1633), one of the early fathers of congregational ecclesiology. His study is motivated by the modern controversy regarding ministerial office within Baptist churches as it articulates and assesses Browne’s concept of ordained ministry in the light of the current debate.³² Retrievals like these help Baptist churches to critically

³⁰ Hans Riphagen defended his doctoral thesis at the VU University Amsterdam on 9 June 2021: ‘Church-in-the-Neighbourhood: A Spatio-Theological Ethnography of Protestant Christian Place-making in the Suburban Context of Lunetten, Utrecht.’

³¹ See on Christian hospitality the doctoral research of Michael Pears, ‘Towards a Theological Engagement with an Area of Multiple Deprivation: The Case of the Cornwall Estate’, defended at the VU University Amsterdam on 2 September 2015. Cf. Matthew Edminster’s current doctoral research, ‘The Reality of Fellowship: A Relational and Theological Examination of Fellowship in the Life of a Small Estonian Free Church Congregation’ (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam). See on types of Baptist prejudice for example Lee Spitzer’s doctoral research, ‘“The Hand of Sincere Friendship”: Baptist Responses to Nazi Anti-Semitism and Persecution of the Jewish People (1933–1948)’, defended at the VU University Amsterdam on 6 September 2016, and the current doctoral research of Laura Dijkhuizen, ‘The Invisible Woman: Gender Roles in Contemporary Evangelical Churches in the Netherlands’. See also the master’s dissertation of Inge Boef, ‘Bewegen In Vrijheid: Een onderzoek naar baptistentheologie in relatie tot volwaardige participatie van homoseksuelen in Amerikaanse baptistengemeenten’ (University of Utrecht, 2013). Reggie Williams addressed racial issues among Baptists at the McClendon Lectures held at Baptist House, Amsterdam on 19 November 2018.

³² Jan Martijn Abrahamse defended his thesis ‘The Stripping of the Ministry: A Reconsideration and Retrieval of Robert Browne’s Theology of Ordained Ministry’ at the VU University

reconsider their so-called crown-jewels, their distinctive identity badges.³³

The critical questions raised by these six addresses mainly concern the high standard Baptists and baptistic churches seem to have regarding their capacity to discern and to hammer out their policy and identity aloof from other churches. As Abrahamse's research indicates, the complexity of interpretive leadership within congregational churches requires much from its leaders. They should not only be respected pastors with charisma and unique personal qualities, but also pastors who are teachable, inquisitive, and who know how to study well and to use academic handbooks.

7. Joel Meindersma compared two pioneer churches with regard to the local processes to find out their own communal policies in dealing with ethical issues.³⁴ To be equipped sufficiently for the task of interpretive leadership, pastors not only have to be familiar with peer-groups and supervision, the pressures they face requires them also to be able to mentor themselves and to access additional training and the solid provisions made available by the Baptist Union.³⁵ Local churches should

Amsterdam on 10 January 2018. See also Jan Martijn Abrahamse and Wout Huizing, eds, *Van onderen! Op zoek naar een ambtstheologie voor een priesterschap van gelovigen*, Baptistica Reeks, (Amsterdam: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2014).

³³ See also the retrievals of Lon Graham, "All Who Love Our Blessed Redeemer": The Catholicity of John Ryland Jr', defended at the VU University Amsterdam on 19 January 2021. Cf. Samuel Renihan, 'From Shadow to Substance: The Roots and Rise of the Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1702)', defended at the VU University Amsterdam on 26 October 2017.

³⁴ Joel Meindersma, 'Ethische dilemma's' (batchelor's dissertation, Ede University of Applied Sciences, 2016). See also Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo, 'Creating a Culture of Communal Discernment in Dutch Baptist Churches' (master's dissertation, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, 2014).

³⁵ See Marijn Vlasblom, 'Geleerd en geleefd: narratief onderzoek naar het geleefde geloof van studenten van het baptisten seminarium' (master's dissertation, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2016), and 'ChurchSense en de toepasbaarheid voor Baptistengemeenten' (batchelor's dissertation, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2015). Cf. Arjen Kwantes, 'Wie geneest de dokter?' (batchelor's dissertation, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2016). See also Arjan Dekker and André Molenaar, 'Voorganger ben je niet alleen?!' (batchelor's dissertation, Ede University of Applied Sciences, 2011), and Daniël van Maaren, Jonathan Vedder, and Jonathan van den Helder, 'Leiderschapstransitie binnen de Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland' (batchelor's dissertation, Ede University of Applied Sciences, 2012).

be accurately informed about, and be held accountable for, the extended spiritual formation programmes of their pastors.

8. As interpretive leaders, Baptist pastors put effort in trying to read and reconstruct the narrative of the church as it emerges from lived faith, learned faith, and scripture. Research in this field has been accomplished by Mattias Rouw, Hans Baak, Martijn Nijhoff, and Paulus de Jong. Rouw compared two quite different Baptist churches, one high liturgical and the other almost non-liturgical, and typified them accordingly. He carefully observed and coded the prayers addressed to God during several services, and succeeded in making a thick description of the ‘story’ told in the communal services.³⁶ Baak and Nijhoff compared two Baptist churches as to their employment of sermons and biblical content during fifteen services. Which narratives have been told and retold by sermons and by use of the Bible, in particular by its interpretations and applications? What interconnectedness between these narratives and the shared self-understanding of the communities was apparent? Baak and Nijhoff carefully drew up a thick description of the ‘story’ told in the religious services by thorough analyses of the sermons, corroborated by interviews and surveys.³⁷ Paulus de Jong analysed the inclination of a local Baptist church to isolate itself by being absorbed in discussions on church music and communal singing.³⁸

9. Quite differently, but altogether affirmative of the interplay between the whereabouts of churches, their communal self-understanding, and their interpretive leadership, is the research accomplished by Wout Huizing and Ronald van den Oever (see further in this *JEBIS* issue), who elaborate on previous research done by Gerard Grit and Thomas Steenberg. The purpose of the research *Groentjes* was to investigate and explore the narrative (storied) self-understanding of a number of ageing communities. Even though the subject matter has some uneasiness about it, the churches consulted were quite open

³⁶ Mattias Rouw, ‘Het verhaal van het gebed: Een onderzoek naar gebed en baptistenidentiteit’ (master’s dissertation, Utrecht University, 2013).

³⁷ Hans Baak and Martijn Nijhoff, ‘Prediking en Baptisten identiteit’ (bachelor’s dissertation, Ede University of Applied Sciences, 2015).

³⁸ Paulus de Jong, ‘Muziek en morele ruimte’ (bachelor’s dissertation, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2015).

and benefitted from the consultation and discussions on developing feasible policies with regard to setting the right conditions for raising intergenerational concern among their members.³⁹

In closing this brief presentation of the research trajectory of Mapping Baptist Identity, the adage of Olof de Vries comes to mind, posing that ‘Baptist communities are of time, and not of eternity’.⁴⁰ To be sure, Baptist churches are discerning churches, led by interpretation, but the storied embodiment of their convictions does convey timely idiosyncrasies and challenges, such as (1) to genuinely engage and be conversant with the non-believing world, with believers of different beliefs, and/or with believers who believe differently. Already in 2010, Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo published the rather alarming result of a broad survey conducted in the greater part of the Baptist Union that most of these churches were inclined to isolate themselves from society and to become almost invisible.⁴¹ (2) Yet, in their pursuit for strong missional presence Baptist churches are prompted to transform into porous communities of discernment, bodies with strong relations in their communal centre (watchcare⁴²), and ready to explore the mind of Christ. (3) Involvement in these dynamics confront churches with their political and ethical reservations, and challenges them to reconsider their

³⁹ Wout Huizing and Ronald van den Oever, *Groentjes in Baptistengemeenten in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Baptistenseminarium, 2017). Cf. Gerard Grit and Thomas Steenbergen, ‘Het zilveren fundament – een visie voor een ouder wordende kerk’ (bachelor’s dissertation, Ede University of Applied Sciences, 2013).

⁴⁰ Olof H. de Vries, *Gelovig gedoopt – 400 jaar baptisme, 150 jaar in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), pp. 24, 74, 91. Cf. Olof H. de Vries, *Alles is geschiedenis: Bouwstenen voor een baptistische geloofsvisie uit de dogmatiek van Olof H. De Vries*, ed. by Henk Bakker, Jelle Horjus, Jos Jumelet, Teun van der Leer, and Anne de Vries (Utrecht: Kok, 2015); Henk Bakker, Albrecht Boerrieger, Jeanette van Es, and Winfried Ramaker, eds, *De geschiedenis van het Schriftwoord gaat door: Gedachten ter markering van de theologie van dr. O. H. de Vries* (Utrecht: Kok, 2014); and Henk Bakker and Teun van der Leer, eds, *Smeltend ijs: Olof de Vries over tijd en traditie, geschiedenis en gemeente*, Baptistica Reeks (Amsterdam: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2017). See Arjen Stellingwerf, ‘Johannes Elias Feisser: Nederlandse Baptistenpionier in Gasselternijveen’ (bachelor’s dissertation, Theological University Kampen, 2016). See also Sibbele Meindersma, *Veilig of heilig* (Baptist Seminary, Amsterdam, 2015) on a comparison of the theological legacy of Jannes Reiling (1923–2005) with the missional vision of Urban Expression.

⁴¹ Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo, *Gemeenten op een gezonde weg? Gezonde gemeenten in de Unie van Baptistengemeenten* (Barneveld: Baptistenseminarium, 2010).

⁴² See for the notion of ‘watchcare’ James Wm McClendon, Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 51–53, 77, 227–232.

reluctance and hesitance towards an inclusivist demeanour.⁴³ (4) Baptist reservations toward catholicity and ecumenism have become a constitutive element of Baptist identity, which intrinsically thwarts an open missional attitude of the church. Still, the gift of catholicity abides and rests with the church, even if neglected.⁴⁴

Evangelical Theology and Identity in The Netherlands

Baptist scholars have been involved in the Evangelical movement from the late 1980s until now. When the Centre for Evangelical and Reformation Theology started at the VU University Amsterdam (CERT 2005–2015), the Baptist Seminary partnered in the enterprise. When the CERT was succeeded by the Herman Bavinck Centre for Reformed and Evangelical Theology (HBCRET 2015–), Baptist House partnered again. Moreover, it contributed in both programmes, and also to two major publications on contemporary developments in evangelical theology.⁴⁵ In 2017, independently from CERT, the first comprehensive treatment on the story, development, and peculiarities of the Dutch

⁴³ Cf. Albrecht Boerrigter, ‘Dutch Baptist Way of Political Involvement’ (master’s dissertation, Faculty of Philosophy, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2013).

⁴⁴ Cf. Henk Bakker, ‘The Changing Face of Unity or: Cutting the Right Edges in the Proper Way’, in *Catholicity under Pressure: The Ambiguous Relationship between Diversity and Unity: Proceedings of the 18th Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica*, ed. by Dagmar Heller and Péter Szentpétery, Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau, 105 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), pp. 81–89, and Henk Bakker, ‘Congregationalist en katholiek?’, *Kontekstueel*, 22, no. 5 (2008), 15–18.

⁴⁵ See Henk Bakker, ‘Finding a Place of Holiness: Towards a Typological Characterisation of Evangelical Churches in the Netherlands’, in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Essays Under the Auspices of the Center of Evangelical and Reformation Theology (CERT)*, ed. by C. van der Kooi, E. van Staalduijn-Sulman, and A. W. Zwiep, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion, 1 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012), pp. 15–39, and Bakker, ‘Towards an Evangelical Hermeneutic of Authority’, in *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority: Essays Under the Auspices of the Center of Evangelical and Reformation Theology (CERT)*, ed. by M. Klaver, S. Paas, and E. van Staalduijn-Sulman, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion, 6 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016), pp. 25–43. Cf. Henk Bakker, ‘Allemaal evangelicaal? Perspectieven op de evangelische beweging’, in *Kerkelijke Nederland van de kaart*, ed. by Koert van Bekkum and George Harinck, Bavinck Lezingen 2007 (Barneveld: Historisch Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme [1800–heden], Vrije Universiteit en *Nederlands Dagblad*, 2007), pp. 31–51.

evangelical movement was published and presented on 18 May 2017 at Driebergen.⁴⁶

Subsequently, a joint initiative was taken by the Baptist House (VU University Amsterdam) and Radboud University Nijmegen to conduct a research on ‘belonging, believing, and identity among evangelical protestants anno 2020’.⁴⁷ Besides the VU and Radboud, a variety of other partners are involved (e.g. Kampen Theological University, The Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Company, Missie Nederland, Stichting Opwekking, and other organisations, denominations, and single churches), whose aim it is to inquire into changing patterns of belonging as well as into the meaning-making associated with this, and to draw up a broad and up-to-date survey of the Dutch evangelical movement in this regard.

Currently HBCRET is in the process of hammering out a research programme on the ‘immediacy and presence’ that goes together with a ‘heuristic of perceiving God’. In other words, the researchers involved set out to reflect on, discuss, and study humanity’s susceptibility towards God, and how (if at all) they may perceive God. Despite the fact that the Netherlands may be considered a secularised country — after all, within half a century the established churches lost almost half of their membership — the average Dutch citizen does reckon with something ‘divine’ or ‘beyond’ or ‘out there’. So, what exactly is knowledge from beyond, and what is transcending knowledge or revelation?

Leadership by Interpretation

So far, the issue of interpretive leadership has only briefly been addressed. In subsequent paragraphs its necessity as well as its complexity become more apparent and compelling. The following five fields of research, namely (1) ‘leadership and ordained ministry’, (2) ‘Christian texts on inclusion and exclusion’, (3) ‘martyrdom texts in five

⁴⁶ Cf. Laura Dijkhuizen and Henk Bakker, eds, *Typisch evangelisch: Een stroming in perspectief* (Amsterdam: Ark Media, 2017).

⁴⁷ Initiators are Hans Riphagen (Dutch Baptist Seminary), Paul Vermeer, and Peer Scheepers (Radboud University, Nijmegen).

world religions’, (4) ‘mystagogy and early Christian texts’, and (5) ‘Free Churches and sacramental traditions’, clearly underline the importance of critical hermeneutical training and understanding within the Dutch Baptist academic community. Leadership by interpretation needs an academic learning community to critically materialise its desires, its parameters, and its objectives.

Church Leadership and Ordained Ministry

In 2011 Eddy van der Borght (VU) launched a national research platform, with various academies and church denominations involved, to mutually investigate how ecclesial leadership and ordained ministry coincide in these denominations, and how future leadership is envisaged from these different perspectives. In 2020 this resulted in an academic compilation of articles on religious leadership in a post-Christian era in the Netherlands.⁴⁸ In the same year, Jan Martijn Abrahamse’s dissertation was published on ordained ministry from a Free Church perspective through a critical retrieval of Robert Browne.⁴⁹

Inclusion and Exclusion

In 2020 the research group Inclusion and Exclusion started at the VU University Amsterdam, facilitated and run by Bernhard Reitsma. This research is oriented toward ‘mechanisms of in- and exclusion’, as these are operative within core texts of the Christian faith and lived religion. How are these texts being embodied in church life, and how do churches deal with tensions between texts, traditions, and multi-religious society, in particular within the context of Islam?⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jan Martijn Abrahamse, Henk Bakker, Leo Koffeman and Peter-Ben Smit, ‘Geordineerd ambt en leiderschap’, in *Religieuze leiderschap in post-christelijke Nederland*, ed. by Leon van den Broeke and Eddy Van der Borght (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2020), pp. 257–94. Cf. Henk Bakker, ‘Het congregationale [independentistische] perspectief’, in *Nooit meer eene nieuwe hiërarchie! De kerkrechtelijke nalatenschap van F.L. Rutgers*, ed. by Leon van den Broeke and George Harinck, Ad Chartas-Reeks, 34 (Hilversum: De Vuurbaak, 2018), pp. 125–33, and Bakker, ‘De bisschop is van beneden, niet van boven: een congregationale benadering’, *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Kerk & Recht*, 5 (2011), 54–65.

⁴⁹ Jan Martijn Abrahamse, *Ordained Ministry in Free Church Perspective: Retrieving Robert Browne (C. 1550–1633) for Contemporary Ecclesiology*, Studies in Reformed Theology, 41 (Leiden and Boston; Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁵⁰ Forthcoming: Henk Bakker, ‘Otherness and Exile: Jesus’ Attitude Towards Sinners and Outsiders’.

Martyrdom Texts in Five World Religions

In 2017, Baptist House took the initiative of calling together experts from the five world religions to sit together (heuristically) and read and interpret martyr texts from these traditions, and to publish our findings in Dutch in order to instigate discussion. This unique enterprise resulted in the publication of a compilation of presentations in 2021 by Amsterdam University Press.⁵¹

This book aims at a three-fold outcome: (1) critical study of religious texts on martyrdom; (2) analysis as to how these texts function in contemporary debate on martyrdom; (3) furthering dialogue and understanding between different religious strands on matters of suffering for one's faith. Contributors are Victor van Bijlert (Indian Religions and Sanskrit, Faculty of Religion and Theology (FRT), VU), Henk Blezer (Buddhist Studies and Asia Studies, FRT/VU; Leiden University), Michael Bloemendal (Jewish Studies, FRT/VU), Pieter Coppens (Islam Studies, FRT/VU), Jan Willem van Henten (Science of Religion, University of Amsterdam; Old and New Testament, Stellenbosch University), Ab de Jong (Comparative Religion, Leiden University), Lucien van Liere (Science of Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University), Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (New Testament, FRT/VU), and Henk Bakker (Baptistic and Evangelical Theologies, FRT/VU).

With regard to Baptist history and tradition, Baptist House is pre-committed to be engaged in research on the hermeneutics of martyrdom, persecution, suffering and violence.⁵²

⁵¹ Henk Bakker and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, eds, *Dan liever dood! Over martelaren en hun religieuze drijfveren* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

⁵² See Henk Bakker, 'A Martyr's Pain is Not Pain: Mystagogical Directives in Tertullian's *Ad martyras*, and some other North African Martyr Texts', in *Seeing Through the Eyes of Faith: New Approaches to the Mystagogy of the Church Fathers*, ed. by Paul van Geest, Late Antique History and Religion, 11 (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), pp. 629–48; "'Beyond the Measure of Man": About the Mystery of Socratic Martyrdom', *Church History and Religious Culture*, 95 (2015), 1–17; 'Potamiaena: Some Observations About Martyrdom and Gender in Ancient Alexandria', in *The Wisdom of Egypt. Jewish, Early Christian and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen*, ed. by A. Hilhorst, and G. H. van Kooten, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, 59 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 331–50; 'Animosity and (Voluntary) Martyrdom: The Power of the Powerless', in *Animosity, the Bible and Us: Some European, North American and South African*

Mystagogy and the Early Church

Likewise, the Dutch Baptist Seminary treasures critical reflection on Christian sources from the earliest Christian times to early medieval times. Hence its participation in the Centre for Patristic Research (VU University Amsterdam and Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, 2008–2018), and the Centre for Patristic Research and Studies of Early Christianity (2018–). At this moment the McClendon Chair partakes in the FRT/VU department of Texts and Traditions, and is involved in the Amsterdam/Tilburg Early Church and Mystagogy project,⁵³ as the project is within early Christological studies.⁵⁴ Precisely with regard to its conciliarism and apologetics early Christianity has much to offer for present debates on the marginalisation of the church in western

Perspectives, ed. by John T. Fitzgerald, Fika J. van Rensburg, and Herrie F. van Rooy, Society of Biblical Literature, Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, 12 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), pp. 287–97. Cf. Henk Bakker, *Exemplar Domini: Ignatius of Antioch and His Martyrological Self-Concept* (doctoral thesis, Groningen University, Leuven: Peeters, 2003), and *Ze hebben lief, maar worden vervolgd. Radicaal christendom in de tweede eeuw en nu*, 3rd ed. (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2006). Baptist theologian Maurits Luth is preparing his doctoral research at the VU University Amsterdam (supervisors Bakker and Paas) on the idea of ‘being persecuted’ within different strands of European Christianity (‘Estranged, but persecuted? A critical and heuristic exploration concerning persecuted Christians in Western Europe today’).

⁵³ About to be published, Henk Bakker, ‘Kissing Hermas: Convertive Mystagogy in The Shepherd’, in *Mystagogy & the Body*, ed. by Paul van Geest et al., *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensis* (Leuven: Peeters, 2022); Henk Bakker, ‘“So On Earth”: Liturgy From Heaven’, in *Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy*, ed. by Hans van Loon, Giselle de Nie, Michiel Op de Coul, and Peter van Egmond, *Late Antique History and Religion*, 18: *The Mystagogy of the Church Fathers*, Volume 5 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), pp. 41–60.

⁵⁴ See Henk Bakker, *Jezus: Reconstructie en revisie*, 3rd ed. (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2021), and ‘Pneuma-Christology as Applied Christology: Intimacy and Immediacy in the Odes of Solomon’, in *The Spirit is Moving: New Pathways in Pneumatology*, ed. by Gijsbert van den Brink, Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, and Maarten Wisse, *Studies in Reformed Theology*, 38 (Brill: Leiden, 2019), pp. 93–108. See also Henk Bakker, ‘“Yes, We Can”: The Almost Forgotten Flipside of Discipleship’, *Baptistic Theologies*, 7, no. 2 (2015), 25–43.

society.⁵⁵ This involves not only solid textual exegesis, but also the willingness to explore interdisciplinary approaches.⁵⁶

Free Churches and Sacramentalism

From 2020 onwards, the Dutch Baptist Seminary has been collaborating on a global scale with institutions and scholars from a variety of Free Churches to make an inventory of opinions regarding B/baptists and sacramentalism. Much reflection has already been done in this field,⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon, eds, *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, Late Antique History and Religion, 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010); Henk Bakker, “‘Helpers en bondgenoten voor de vrede’: Een peiling van vroege christelijke zelfinterpretatie”, *Radix*, 35, no. 3 (2009), 190–205. Cf. Henk Bakker, “‘Altijd bereid tot verantwoording’: vroegchristelijke apologetiek op de grens”, in *Verantwoord geloof: Handboek christelijke apologetiek*, ed. by H. A. Bakker, M. J. de Kater, and W. van Vlastuin (Kampen: Brevier, 2014), pp. 80–90; Henk Bakker, ‘Herders’, in *Apostelen: dragers van een spraakmakend evangelie*, ed. by P. H. R. van Houwelingen, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 2010), pp. 292–313, ‘Martelaren’, in *Apostelen*, pp. 314–38, ‘Getuigen’, in *Apostelen*, pp. 339–61. See also Henk Bakker, ‘Tangible Church: Challenging the Apparitions of Docetism (I): The Ghost of Christmas Past’; ‘Tangible Church: Challenging the Apparitions of Docetism (II): The Ghost of Christmas Present’; ‘Tangible Church: Challenging the Apparitions of Docetism (III): The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’, in *Baptistic Theologies*, 5, no. 2 (2013), 1–17, 18–35, 36–58 respectively; and ‘De ziel van Europa en de Geest van God’, in *De werking van de Heilige Geest in de Europese cultuur en traditie*, ed. by Erik Borgman, Kees van der Kooi, Akke van der Kooi, and Govert Buijs (Kampen: Kok, 2008), pp. 73–85; and ‘Spirituality and Ethnicity in Holland’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 7, no. 2 (2007), 38–49.

⁵⁶ See Vincent van Altena, Jan Krans, Henk Bakker and Jantien Stoter, ‘GIS as a Heuristic Tool to Interpret Ancient Historiography’, *Transactions in GIS* (forthcoming 2021) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/tgis.12762>>;

Vincent van Altena, Henk Bakker and Jantien Stoter, ‘Advancing New Testament Interpretation through Spatio-Temporal Analysis: Demonstrated by Case Studies’, *Transactions in GIS*, 22, no. 3 (2018), 697–720 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/tgis.12338>>; Vincent van Altena, Jans Krans, Henk Bakker, Balázs Dukai and Jantien Stoter, ‘Spatial Analysis of New Testament Textual Emendations Utilizing Confusion Distances’, *Open Theology*, 5, no. 1 (2019), 44–65 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2019-0004>>; Vincent van Altena, Jan Krans, Henk Bakker, and Jantien Stoter ‘*Ἰουδαίων* in Acts 2:9: A Diachronic Overview of Its Conjectured Emendations’, *Open Theology*, 6, no. 1 (2020), 306–18 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0114>>; Vincent van Altena, Jan Krans, Henk Bakker and Jantien Stoter, ‘*Ἰουδαίων* in Acts 2:9: Reverse Engineering Textual Emendations’, *Open Theology*, 6, no. 1 (2020), 378–91 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0113>>; and also Henk Bakker, ‘Wat is de aard van de zonde in evolutionair perspectief?’, in *En God zag dat het goed was: Christelijk geloof en evolutie in 25 cruciale vragen*, ed. by William den Boer, René Franssen, and Rik Peels (Kampen: Summum Academic, 2019), pp. 279–90.

⁵⁷ Cf. Henk Bakker, ‘Powerful Practices: Celebrating God’s Farewell to the Powers That Be’, in *Baptist Sacramentalism 3*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross, and Philip E. Thompson (Eugene: Pickwick,

however, the organising committee plans to arrange several conferences in the coming years, and expects to publish fresh insights with new voices.

Conclusion

Looking at the research trajectories surveyed above, the Baptist Seminary invests much time and effort in the study of Baptist identity (history and lived Baptist faith), the study of evangelical identity (history and lived evangelical tradition), and in the study of interpretive leadership, as it seeks to understand the dynamics between leadership and (communal) self-understanding. Its many-sidedness makes up the greater part of the Dutch strategy and methodology, because doing the work of theology for the benefit of the churches at the beginning of the third millennium forces the academy to look beyond its own scope and to cooperate, in order to accomplish the work as much as possible with an interdisciplinary mindset. Here the legacy of collaborative and sober Dutch theology pays off, as it urges the Baptist House to foster inquisitiveness and let critical and encouraging reciprocity flourish (BrainChain). As such the Baptist Seminary is a learning community in progress.

To enable regular publication in a variety of fields of interest, the Baptist Seminary took the initiative in starting up the series *Amsterdam Studies in Baptist and Mennonite Theology* in 2021 (Summum Academic, Brevier Kampen), which is a joint venture in cooperation with the Mennonite Chair of Peace Theology and Ethics (VU University, Amsterdam) and the IBTS Chair of Christian Social Ethics (VU University, Amsterdam).

Reflecting on the outcome of a wide range of researches — the evaluation of which can only be done briefly — the results indicate that Baptist identity as well as evangelical identity are in motion. Baptist

2020), pp. 259–79, and Jan Martijn Abrahamse, ‘Enough to Set a Kingdom Laughing: Divine Tragicomedy and Easter Laughing in a Weeping World’, in *Baptist Sacramentalism 3*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross, and Philip E. Thompson (Eugene: Pickwick, 2020), pp. 280–96. See also Henk Bakker, ‘The Roaring Side of the Ministry: A Turn to Sacramentalism’, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 38, no. 4 (2011), 403–26.

identity transforms from the inside out, as the core quality of this type of church is to sit down together and reflect on Scripture, and in particular how it pertains to church-and-world. In their pursuit of strong missional presence Baptist churches are prompted to transform into porous communities of discernment, bodies with strong relational ties in the community of faith, yet open to explore the mind of Christ for the world. Therefore, most Baptist communities in The Netherlands may be qualified as ‘discerning churches’, and for that matter as communities in need of interpretive leadership to conduct processes of communal self-understanding vis-à-vis a highly secularised society.

Training and equipping interpretive leaders may be seen as the core vocation of the Baptist Seminary and its VU-Chair. Pastors, and other ecclesial teachers, should be able to ‘read’ and understand the lives of individuals and communities in the light of contemporary texts (newspapers, literature, arts), combined with authoritative texts (Scripture, tradition). Consequently, interpretative leaders must be familiar with hermeneutical queries and complexities, and should be able to keep up with academic discussions and developments accordingly. Subsequently, they should be qualified to moderate, and ‘feed’, discussions in church and on other platforms on issues such as inclusivism/exclusivism (in terms of social, ethnic, and gender differences), sacramentalism (baptism, eucharist, and ordination), mystagogy (guiding Christians into a deeper life with God), even on martyrdom (and controversies between religions). See the aforementioned paragraphs for research and literature on these subjects.

The Baptist disposition towards cocooning, and hence neglecting the gift of catholicity, may be overcome by the gentle persuasion of today’s inner transformation. Many churches do assemble, pray, listen to the Word, study the Bible, and reflect on urgent matters to be discussed. If the academy takes upon itself a leading role in this, future pastors trained at the Dutch Baptist Seminary may be a source of hope, comfort, and joy.

