

Editorial

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In Spring 2020 the Dutch Baptists celebrated their 175th anniversary as a free church, and marked the occasion with a compilation of written portraits of ten remarkable persons whose lives more or less highlight the story. Subsequently, Dr Erik de Boer, Professor of Church History at Kampen Theological University, was invited to write a first response on these portraits, and I think his reaction was both telling and compelling. Telling that he noticed how the Dutch Baptist Union, within the course of the second half of the twentieth century, took a turn to academic emancipation, and compelling that he used even more words to raise the issue of Dutch Baptist beginnings and its stance towards catholicity: how catholic were these beginnings in the year 1845?¹

Both observations are accurate and somehow typify the frame of mind of the Dutch Baptists, represented by its seminary. Indeed, the seminary fosters a culture of inquisitiveness and academic integrity, which serves to bring students and scholars together in a vibrant and stimulating environment. Yet, the focus of this inquisitiveness is more concentrated on the particulars of Baptist identity than on the relations Baptist (should) have with other denominations, in particular with other Free Churches, and of course with its own natural settings, such as the societal-cultural and social-economical realms. Baptists sometimes give the impression that they do not need other churches and other denominations, and that they can do without society, without culture

¹ Erik de Boer, 'Hoe katholiek is het Nederlands baptisme?', in Teun van der Leer and Arjen Stellingwerf, *Terug naar de toekomst: 175 jaar baptisme in Nederland in tien portretten*, Baptistica Reeks (Amsterdam: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2020), pp. 103–109 (p. 105, 'hoe katholiek mag het begin van het baptisme in Nederland in 1845 heten?'), and p. 107 ('academische emancipatie').

and economy, even without government. They do not need any other environment but their own community of faithful believers. Such has been the felt self-understanding of many Baptist communities in the Netherlands.

Let me give an example, again, from the aforementioned book of portraits. Pastor Jan Louw (1887–1969) was a monumental figure for more than five decades in the early history of Dutch Baptist life. He was not only a trained pastor for forty-one years (at Hamburg *Predigerschule* from December 1912 to January 1954), he was also editor of *De Christen*, the well-known Baptist weekly journal (and read by many!), for no less than fifty years (1913–1963). Louw wrote extensively in *De Christen*, and deservedly left his mark on Baptist life at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. However, just to give an impression of Baptist culture by the end of the 1950s, I quote Louw as he wrote in the journal on his communal self-understanding as a Baptist:

We, Baptists, are communal Christians. We wish and seek to realise the New Testament concept of congregation, which lives up to the purpose of Christ's return to the world. This community has its own particular trait, as it has a distinctive origin and destination! [...] It is an entirely unique formation, superseding civic as well as governmental organisation, and cannot be a national church or a folk church. This community is a faith community: interface between heaven and earth, symptom of metaphysical life materialised in temporary and worldly existence.² (Translation mine)

Ever since the late fifties, things have changed dramatically in the Netherlands. After six decades of secularism, any attitude of Christian self-complacency and self-sufficiency is out of place. Baptists, too, have to deal with different times, with different churches, and yes, with different Christians, even with diversities of Christians. Not only culture and society secularise, Christians themselves also secularise. They may still 'wish and seek to realise the New Testament concept of congregation', but may capitulate to the rather presumptuous and superficial indication that the church 'supersedes' every other body of peoplehood. The time has come for the church to not supersede, not to be condescending, but to connect as equals.

² Wout Huizing, 'Jan Louw (1887–1969): Leraar en leider', in Teun van der Leer and Arjen Stellingwerf, *Terug naar de toekomst*, pp. 58–67 (p. 62).

Therefore, the Baptist Seminary gratefully accepts the invitation to make this *JEB S* volume into a showcase of Dutch Baptist theology, so as to measure what its state of the art could actually be. As such this issue is just a piece of the puzzle of regional theology, one of the many sorts and sides of Baptist theology prevalent in different districts and countries. The Netherlands has its own hinterland of theological tracks and traces prompting Baptist churches in due course of time to develop their own emphases, and peculiarities, of believing and behaving.

So, in order to build this timely showcase, the Dutch Baptist Seminary invited staff, teachers, and students to participate. Our aim is to give a genuine impression of the research we are and have lately been involved in, and to underscore its feel for differentiation. This resulted in eight contributions from a variety of Baptist scholars.

In the opening article I present a resumé of most of the research executed and/or supervised by the Dutch Baptist Seminary, together with the James Wm McClendon Chair. The emphasis running through the presentation is both on scope and focus, on the variety of the research and its orientation, which is basically on the complexities of interpretive leadership within Dutch ecclesial contexts.

Subsequently, three historical articles reflect on Dutch Baptist history, the whereabouts of the early Christian bishop Ignatius of Antioch, and the intricacies of historical interpretation within theological discourse. First, Teun van der Leer and Arjen Stellingwerf navigate through chronicles, events, ideas, and names constitutive of Dutch Baptist identity, which they epitomise with the image of a ‘multi-coloured robe’, a metaphor reminiscent of the Joseph narrative in the book of Genesis. The colours on this robe are the result of the sweep of a ‘pendulum’ (Olof de Vries) between processes of institutionalisation and processes of motion and movement.

Thereupon Vincent van Altena works carefully through the spatial details of the seven authentic letters of the correspondence of the early Christian bishop and martyr Ignatius of Antioch. The research combines spatial-temporal techniques with exegetical and interpretive observations in order to clear logistic questions regarding the bishop’s

itinerary. The result is a deep and multifaceted concern of Christian communities to reach out to fellow Christians in need.

Jan Martijn Abrahamse closes the brief historical strand with a critical investigation of the theory of retrieval. All too often the work of theology comes with historical ‘evidence’, which, on reconsideration, delivers no proof at all. Rooting theology in historical biases and inadequacies is not only wrong in terms of academic integrity, it has also moral repercussions, as it affects theology itself.

The second strand of articles is on the work of theology, mainly on practical theology, albeit that it is rather impossible to make a sharp distinction between lived theology and learned theology. However, Hans Riphagen opens with an evaluation of a collaborative research trajectory in Baptist theological education. He discusses its possibilities and hiccups, its significance and disappointment, as he attempts to critically assess and valorise this type of research for the benefit of the academy.

Then Wout Huizing, with Hans Riphagen, reviews his inquiry into small Baptist communities with a relatively high percentage of elderly people, and with almost no anticipation of renewal or growth. It is interesting to learn that the responses of these churches cannot be classified as reactions of surrender, defeat, panic or depression. On the contrary, for the outcome demonstrates vital health and open-mindedness towards the pending future of the church and to its intergenerational puzzles.

Finally, Ingeborg te Loo closes the second strand with an exploration into contemplative practices of Baptist pastors in their private lives. She interviewed a group of pastors and processed their responses for the purpose of a spiritual-theological estimation of non-Baptistic spiritual traditions. The outcome of this investigation, too, is rather confirmative of the fact that Baptist spiritual traditions tend to merge with other traditions.

In the closing article on the Baptist Seminary and the ‘life of the mind’ Regien Smit and I draw up concluding reflections on the list of contributions, inasmuch as they are indicative of Dutch Baptist theology. How does the seminary convey its theological strengths and

weaknesses, what are its current challenges? The seminary envisages as its future ecclesial leaders, trained hermeneuticians who understand the dynamics of interpretive leadership. Interpretive leaders are able to 'listen' to the Scripture, to their culture, to the church(es), and to their own hearts (mental well-being and spirituality), in order to bring these four meaningfully together for the sake of Christian theology (sense-making). All of this certainly pertains to the life of the mind, and the ramifications are far-reaching. The seminary, as an academic learning community, is being challenged to continue, and deepen, its interdisciplinary way of doing theology, and to broaden its vision (and dealings) on catholicity.

