

Academic Community and the Life of the Mind

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Introduction

The leading question in this closing article is whether from previous contributions a ‘state of the art’ of contemporary Dutch Baptist academic theology can be distilled. In order to come to a conclusive suggestion, first a recapitulation will be given of the articles that have been presented to collect what can be derived from their content and aims. *Prima facie*, the foremost interest of Dutch Baptist academic work is with history and primary theology (experiential theology). Its basic concern is with the bi-focal balance between primary theology, the church as the laboratory of theology on the one hand, and the chronicles of these churches on the other. In particular, the Baptist Seminary functions as a counterbalance in reaching equilibrium by invoking and stimulating the qualities of inquisitiveness, sense-making, and above all interpretive leadership.

A Learning Community in Progress, by Henk Bakker

This article offers an overview of the academic theological programme of the Dutch Baptist Seminary throughout the last decade. This overview shows a major concern for a deeply rooted attitude of isolation from and suspicion within the Dutch Baptist movement towards the broad catholic Christian tradition.

In the OKBI programme on Baptist identity, the concern with this so-called flipside of a strong identity and a likewise strong self-understanding of being a discerning community, appears to be a direct object of study. This programme pays attention to Baptist ecclesiology, which lacks self-consciousness and discourse, as the church connects with the reality of its place within a post-Christendom epoch: a church in diaspora, on the margins of power.

The topic of leadership particularly comes to the fore. What kind of leadership is requested from those who are supposed to lead the Baptist community in a different, that is a more open, direction in order to prevent it from further alienation and isolation from the world? In this article this type of leadership is expressed through the term ‘interpretative leadership’, meaning the ability to make sense of the contemporary world in relation to the Biblical text, with skills to do theology well.

In addition, the Seminary, and especially the James Wm McClendon Chair, makes efforts to open the Baptist view towards the merits of Christian faith in other traditions by partaking in several inquiry programmes that seek interdisciplinary, interdenominational, and even interreligious collaboration. Its aim is to exhort academic inquisitiveness, to take the freedom to explore with an open mind what church history and ancient theological debate has to offer to the (Baptist) church today. The retrieval of sources in the past beyond the birth of the Baptist movement is one of the key tools for making theology enriching for today.

The conclusion of this article breathes the hope that the academic success in surpassing the borders of ‘cocooning and forgetting about the vocation for unity and catholicity’ will result in a different educational atmosphere for future pastors, and in their slipstream subsequently in the local communities, turning them into the learning communities that Baptists want (or claim) them to be.

Dutch Baptist Identity (1845–2021): A Multi-Coloured Robe, by Teun van der Leer and Arjen Stellingwerf

Taking the concept of Baptist identity as a historical phenomenon, this article aims to discern between the different colours of the Dutch Baptist identity in its specific historical context, showing how diversity, changeability, and variety go along with the maintenance of its fundamental identity markers. The latter being an ordered local community as *the* crystallisation of being church, independence of local churches, combined with supra-local connectedness with sister-churches, and a passion for revival and evangelism.

The article separates four epochs, which had their own historical contexts with which the Baptist movement had to negotiate in going through its process of identity construction. In this process, the swinging back and forth between ‘movement’ on the one hand and ‘institution’ on the other comes alternately to the foreground. In the description of the different epochs, typical aspects of Dutch society become also aspects of Dutch Baptist life, such as the development of a Baptist pillar, be it on a more moderate scale than the mainstream Christian traditions. Negotiation with developments in Dutch society could also bring tensions that deeply challenged the unity in diversity of the Baptist Union, as happened, for instance, in the emancipatory aims of the Baptist Seminary in seeking collaboration with and acknowledgement by the academic world.

The last and still ongoing epoch, however, shows how both the Union of Baptist communities and the Seminary did manage to uphold their connection, while in the meantime the academic ambitions of the Seminary did not decline. To the contrary, there is a broadening of academic horizon going on, but along with an effort to strengthen the relationship between academic staff, union staff, and communities. This changed the way of doing theology from ‘learned theology’ to ‘lived theology’, with the community as its ‘laboratory’.

This article concludes with the trustful declaration that pluralism and fluidity increasingly will become the future shape of Baptist identity, but without the loss of its typical Baptist colours, being ‘a combination

of a certain self-evident Reformed orthodoxy, seasoned with a strong evangelical flavour, and a growing ecumenical curiosity and openness’.

Investigations into the Logistics of Ignatius’s Itinerary, by Vincent van Altena

This next article presents an investigation into the surrounding historical and geographical context of the letters of Ignatius, a well-known bishop and believed martyr of the early church. The idea behind this investigation is to gain more insight into the quality of the social relationships between Ignatius and representatives of the churches that became involved in his itinerary as a prisoner.

The context that should enlighten these relationships contains the specific modes and possibilities of travelling over long distances within the Roman Empire of the first century as well as its limitations and perils; and besides that, the adjacent means of communication. The article offers a reconstruction of the journey combined with historical data of contacts between Ignatius and representatives of local churches.

The findings of this investigation highlight the dire necessity of the support given by local communities, because of the harsh conditions of travelling while being captured. Second, they show the extremity of the efforts that were made by those who supported Ignatius, in terms of the long distances they travelled themselves to meet and accompany him as their fellow believer. Finally, they stress the high motivation and naturalness of this kind of support as obviously intrinsic to being a Christian community. This gives the reader a compelling impression of the early church.

Rooting Our Systematic Theologies: The Moral Dimension of a Theology of Retrieval, by Jan Martijn Abrahamse

This article discusses the merits and perils of ‘theologies of retrieval’ by taking James McClendon’s treatment of the Schleithem confession as an example. Theologies of retrieval aim to rehabilitate the historical character of Christianity by making the effort to re-investigate ancient texts and bring them into current theological debate. By doing so,

theologians endeavour to overcome the post-Enlightenment bias that treats pre-Enlightenment sources with the prejudice of critical science. While giving theologies of retrieval their credit, this article presents a warning against a too naive approach to historical narratives. This naivety can come across in two ways. First, it might neglect the fact that historical sources themselves are not free from interpretation. Second, it might overlook the theologian's position, which is not neutral, while approaching the historical text.

In presenting the Schleithem confession as a historical turning point, namely a restoration of pre-Constantinian Christianity, wrongly overshadowed by the Münster tragedy, McClendon overlooks the normative character of the writings he uses, as well as his own theological agenda, which deprives him from distance to the historical text.

In conclusion this article makes a plea for precaution in treating historical texts in order to bring them into theological debate. It is only when we treat the text as an 'actual other' that we really bring another voice from the past into the current discourse. This asks for 'solid research' of the historical sources and 'reluctance' towards overly grand claims.

Doing Theology Together in a 'Baptist Way'? An Evaluation of the Potential of Curriculum-Embedded Collaborative Research Projects, by Hans Riphagen

This article presents an educational experiment, conducted as a collaboration between first-year Baptist Seminary students, regional coordinators and a number of local churches. This experiment, doing collaborative research as part of a first-year course, was motivated by the aim of the 'valorisation' of education (its relevancy or value for communal life), which intends to prepare students for an ordained ministry in local Baptist churches.

The evaluation of this experiment provided several interesting and promising insights. The theoretical expectations of this experiment were not lived up to. The limits in time and the limited level of knowledge of the first-year students did not give enough input for

theoretical depth. Future experiments require a lower expectation as well as more precise preparation of measures, methods and goals.

Positively, the performative dimension of collaboration with the field of practice has proved its capacity to offer learning possibilities. The encounter between students and church members creates a space where the unexpected happens, which requires several skills to be learnt, such as attentiveness, and interpretative flexibility. Skills that can be viewed as highly relevant for contemporary leaders and theologians.

Growing Grey and Growing Green: Re-narrating Ageing in Baptist Churches in the Netherlands, by Wout Huizing and Hans Riphagen

This article problematises the apparent conformism of Baptist churches to the dominant discourse in the Netherlands concerning old age. Being old is continuously depicted as a problem and is supposed to be a frightening prospect, from the medical as well as the economic or societal perspective.

In 2013, earlier research about the perception of ageing in churches was published in the journal *Baptisten.nu*. This publication provoked discussion and questions to the extent that demanded a follow-up research programme.

The report of the latter research shows how theological reflection on church practices brings about a new and moreover a corrective Scripture-based discourse. Besides that, the decision to conduct this research in collaboration with the church communities involved in the matter (churches with a relatively high average age) appeared to be highly effective in bringing about new thought and insight within the place where it belongs: the church.

The article ends with the remark that a certain courage is needed to enter into a real encounter with the object of research, because its concreteness mirrors the life of the researcher too, with all the questions and fears that come along with it.

A Conversation About Contemplative Practices, by Ingeborg te Loo

The article that closes the sequence shows a theological debate in its very preliminary stage. It starts a conversation in response to the observation that the Baptist movement in its historical development seems to have missed elements that have made the broad Christian tradition as rich as it is. The topic of this conversation is the contemplative dimension of faith.

The proposition of the article is that in Baptist faith practices contemplation rarely occurs, while in the meantime in the surrounding secular world the longing for mindfulness, silence, seclusion from the pressures of daily life increases.

The conversation was held with a small focus group of Baptist pastors, who have personal experience with contemplation due to their denominational background or otherwise. It sought to find connections and obstacles between the apophatic (speechless) make-up of the contemplative dimension of faith and the cataphatic (linguistic) characteristics of Baptist faith.

In reviewing the results of the conversation, the article makes the suggestion for more openness towards both (apophatic and cataphatic) dimensions, in order to enrich and deepen spiritual life.

Reflections and Implications

The historical overview by Teun van der Leer and Arjen Stellingwerf shows a paramount and powerful aspect of the Dutch Baptist movement, namely its capacity to maintain a strong connection between church and academy.

The academic programme resulting from the McClendon Chair at the Vrije Universiteit (VU), being an opportunity to develop a particularised Baptist way of doing theology, has brought this capacity to an even higher level. The articles in this volume can be seen as a result of this development.

Throughout the broad Western Christian tradition, it has turned out to be far from easy to keep the relationship between folk or grassroots believers, church cleric, and academic theology. Many Roman Catholic or Reformed theologians were repudiated or even expelled for their findings, or themselves gradually became alienated from their own church and faith. The free churches have always struggled with tendencies of anti-intellectualism in their process of self-understanding and self-positioning against the mainstream traditions. Among many of these churches, to study academic theology is still seen as equal to losing (the right) faith. From this point of view, the state of the art of Dutch Baptist theology — while belonging to the category of free churches — as it presents itself in this volume, must be valued as a great achievement. Not in the least because in its own environment anti-intellectual voices are heard as well.

With the recognition and appreciation of James McClendon's theological magnum opus in the Netherlands through the installation of the McClendon Chair at the originally Reformed VU University, the Baptist academic world has found a theological playground for its existence and roots. And of course, what is more exciting from an academic point of view than to have fundamental findings of your own to bring into debate with others? And what else can give a Baptist seminary such a firm boost to develop methods for sound and solid education for its future leadership and to endorse love for research among local pastors and even whole communities? This excitement is vibrant in most of the articles presented here.

And yet, besides the enthusiastic approval described above of what Baptist theology in the Netherlands is capable of, there is a main point of reservation and even criticism to bring up for further reflection and debate as well.

Namely, the desire for having a way of doing theology of one's own, the *Baptist* way of doing theology in this respect, creates in itself vulnerability to attitudes of superiority and separatism within the academic realm. In Henk Bakker's description of the inventory by current theologians of worrying aspects within the Baptist movement, it is shown that in the grassroots of the movement this inclination to being discerning and different is already there, deep down in its DNA,

depicted as an existence in ‘splendid isolation’. The generally presupposed *dialectic* dynamic between church life and academic theology suggests that the latter would have a corrective influence towards the former in order to prevent it from a gradual turning into isolation. But what happens when the academic theology itself is in a process of discernment from the way of doing theology by other Christian traditions?

It might mean as a consequence that the relationship between church and academy becomes *too* narrow, which, rather than enabling a powerful dialectic dynamic between the two, could become harmful to it. Two examples from the articles might be helpful to unpack this thought.

The three main characteristics of the Baptist way of doing theology as proposed by McClendon are a focus on lived theology, a strong ecclesiastic orientation, and a hermeneutic narrative perspective. This has led to two striking typologies: the idea of the church as *laboratory*, and the strong policy to achieve *valorisation* of the academic work.

Several articles mention the ‘church as laboratory’ as the main point of departure for Baptist theology. No matter how valuable the vision that theology should start from the midst of church life, the strong normative power that comes from the ideal concept of lived faith, communal convictions and narratives might prevent theological reflection from uneasy observations and questions. Ingeborg te Loo’s article on contemplation shows to the contrary that uneasy observations and questions are at the very heart of theological debate. The question is how to find these observations without taking other Christian traditions into account from the beginning, as this article does. The typology of the Baptist community as laboratory carries the pitfall of limiting the operative field with a lens of *ownness*: one’s own narratives, one’s own practices, one’s own convictions as topics for doing theology.

It is certainly a strength of the Baptist Seminary to strive to achieve relevancy for the Baptist field. In this respect, ‘valorisation’ of the academic work and along with it the educational curriculum cannot be criticised as such. However, in the context of the dialectic dynamic

between theology and church, there is a downside. It is true that theology always must be connected to contemporary reality if it wishes to reach the heart of Christianity. But is it also true that it must always be relevant to the contemporary church? Should theology and academy not also be bothersome, even an annoying opposite, for the church? The article on ageing churches by Wout Huizing and Hans Riphagen is not annoying by tone, but it raises a bothering question: who do our churches follow in their opinion about growing old, God in his revelation or the surrounding western liberal world?

Following up on this, two articles in the volume deserve further discussion because they show the value of moving away from the pivotal dynamic between contemporary Baptist church practices and the academy. The article by Jan Martijn Abrahamse dives into the merits and pitfalls of theologies of retrieval, an approach that aims to involve other voices, in this case from the past, in contemporary theological debate. A daring approach, that is able to bring refreshment, change and modesty in theological views and standpoints. The article by Vincent van Altena is a shining example of a theology of retrieval. Facing the very detailed whereabouts of an old bishop and martyr in the first century, an uneasy distance arises between the contemporary reader and the text, a tension that wants to be solved by interpretation and explanation to the world of today. But the article does no such thing. It leaves us with the uneasiness and otherness. Jan Martijn Abrahamse argues the necessity of this pause of distance and uneasiness in the process of theologies of retrieval. If texts of ancient times are too easily placed in service of a particularised theological agenda, this approach loses its corrective power and becomes a danger instead.

Hence, the Dutch Baptist Seminary has to take care of the 'life of the mind', as has been thematised by Mark Noll in his remarkable book *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (2011). Seventeen years before, Noll had published *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), a book in which he, quite negatively, points to the neglect or one-sidedness of evangelical institutions and denominations in being conversant with the world of science and research. The overall picture is that evangelicalism suffers from long-lasting intellectual hypoxia, which is endemic in terms of the systems of mind-control operative within the greater part of the

evangelical world. However, in his book on the life of the mind, Noll demonstrates how in particular the life of Christ, the very incarnation of the Word, invites Christians to study reality as it is ('come and see'), and to use the faculty of the mind to the full.¹ Knowing Christ is not restrictive of the life of the mind, on the contrary, living with Christ in an academic learning community should breathe oxygen into its appetite for sense-making and conducting solid research.

From here, the Seminary, as a baptistic-evangelical institution, can justifiably take an ecclesiocentric approach, as Stanley Grenz suggests, but only so by renewing its centre as it opens its horizons to other denominations and ecclesial strands, so within its historical and theological interrelatedness with the worldwide church whenever and wherever.² The church, and the academy of service to the church, is not pre-committed to a God who estranges himself from the hurts and hoaxes of life, and who distracts and separates his followers accordingly, because life is not a hoax. By no means should a seminary let itself be confined or restricted to study merely internal voices. There is no truth in isolation. Any Christian seminary living up to its name should always (1) approach reality, despite its complexities and delusions, as one reality, (2) consider the world to be God's, and henceforth as a world grounded on truth, (3) be committed to the premise that every truth is God's, that no truth is forbidden, and that (4) the Triune God allows for truth being explored and debated by different people, even wide varieties of people, because God created humanity in God's image, which is irreversibly relational and social.³

Finally, with regard to the state of the art of academic work generated by the Dutch Baptist Seminary, and the concomitant query into its potential own 'habitus', or as we might call it 'proprium' or finger-prints, the answer must be that legacies never lie, because, in a

¹ Mark Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 38: 'The personality of the incarnation justifies the study of human personality.' See also pp. 46, 83, 121.

² Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 287–324, 336–351.

³ See Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, *The Matrix of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 98–137, and *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology*, *The Matrix of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 342–373.

long run, history will tell. At this moment it would be too hazardous an effort, and all too presumptuous, to attempt even an educated guess, and perhaps better to keep to simple (and scant) impressions. In light of the initial remarks made in this final paragraph, the state of the art of Dutch Baptist academic work should be depicted as lacking proper coherent vision on the early Christian confession of *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia*.⁴ Yet, it is a strange fact of life, a paradox of church life, to see Baptists who wholeheartedly espouse and recognise the authority of early Christian texts and most of the confessions the early fathers were committed to, believe and behave as if these church fathers were wrong in their struggle for unity and catholicity.⁵

For example, James Leo Garrett, in his *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*, offers a broad survey of the history and dynamics of Baptist Theologies, however, the book does not start as a ‘four century study’ (1600–2000), because the very first paragraph is on ‘the Councils, the Creeds, and the Fathers’. After all, even though Baptists consider themselves more as Bible-believing people than creedal people, they owe much to the early creeds, the early Latin Fathers, and the testimonies of early Christians that survived times of suppression.⁶ It seems that in doing theology Baptists have the inclination of cherry-picking. For example, in discussions on the Trinity, or on Jesus’s divinity, Baptists use the church fathers, but on unity and catholicity they dispose of them, because their associations with the early Roman Catholic Church seem all too obvious. This is bad science, or to use some of Noll’s wording: this is a scandal of the Baptist mind.

Nevertheless, on the positive side, it can be stated that the qualities of inquisitiveness and sense-making, with a focus on interpretive leadership, do pay off at the Dutch Baptist Seminary. The

⁴ H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 36th ed. (Rome: Herder, 1976), §150: (Greek) *mian bagian katholikèn kai apostolikèn ekklesiàn* (Symbolum Constantinopolitanum).

⁵ See Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 55–132, and *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 27 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 70–128, 151–177.

⁶ James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), pp. 1–5.

bi-focal disposition (history/texts and practices/beliefs) gradually materialise into a shared awareness of a 'life of the mind' oriented toward critical hermeneutical self-understanding, inasmuch as identity, communally and personally, is a construction of how people grasp themselves in light of the interplay between their history and texts, and their practices and beliefs. The Dutch Baptist Seminary critically evaluates how Baptist communities and individuals, throughout history, comprehend themselves, and in doing so studies their texts and history, their beliefs and practices, together with Scripture. Moreover, its steely resolve is to deem this an interdisciplinary as well as a catholic enterprise, so as to truly esteem and extend the 'life of the mind'.

In sum, in their well-earned joyful self-esteem, granted by the academic invitation to develop a Baptist way of doing theology, the Seminary and its theologians meanwhile do face a major challenge if they wish to overcome the inner inclination to self-isolation from the broad Christian tradition and the surrounding world. It needs more openness towards external voices, such as the past, the pluralistic Christian tradition, other scientific disciplines, and the surrounding world. The rich diversity of the articles presented and the critical voices allowed therein, gives hope for the capacity to do so.

And since the Baptist community is becoming more and more pluralistic in terms of cultural and ecclesial background, its theology in the future will need more than ever the ability to hold positions of tension. Only a theological environment that is multi-layered, with on the one hand a firm practical discipline, close to the church, and on the other hand a more fundamental discipline that is able to involve all the necessary otherness and uneasiness will have enough bridging force.

