

# Radical Discipleship in Participation: Spiritual Formation in Baptist Community

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## **Abstract:**

The missional church movement of the last two decades has awakened a vision for both outreach and social engagement through the mobilisation of the church. In Scandinavia this has also generated a focus on the importance of church planting endeavours in all denominations. While this development is positive, there is also a general consensus that the sustainability of churches is contingent upon the spiritual maturity and commitment of their members. Traditional baptistic emphases on mutuality, community, and accountability are being threatened by growing individualism and consumerism within churches today. In this article, I set out to examine core aspects of Anabaptist and Baptist ecclesiology and pneumatology in relationship to their potential for inspiring a re-visioning of the sacramental character of life in Christian community which can contribute to the discipleship of believers and the realisation of the missional calling of the church. When describing the task of discipleship, this article focuses on the web of ecclesiological convictions that are characteristically Baptist. Here I will present core aspects of Baptist ecclesiology that can collectively contribute to the development of a trinitarian and communal approach to discipleship that is founded on a Baptist sacramental view of the believers' church. The scope of this article forbids discussion of the application of these principles in practice but provides insights into historical theological foundations for a baptistic communal approach to discipleship.

## **Keywords:**

Discipleship; covenantal community; Trinitarian ecclesiology; Baptist sacramentalism

## **Introduction**

Scandinavia has seen an increased emphasis on church planting endeavours which have largely been inspired by the missional church

movement of the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> A renewed vision of the missional character and purpose of the church<sup>2</sup> has placed a strong emphasis on creative social engagement and outreach.<sup>3</sup> However, there is also a growing consensus that participation in the *missio Dei* requires a reciprocal emphasis on both the conscientious spiritual nurture of disciples and their mobilisation for their missional task. This became clear at a recent gathering of church leaders at an annual church planting conference in Oslo, Norway, where it was interesting to note that ‘discipleship’ was the most important concern for most participants. Discussions among participants centred on the means for encouraging personal spiritual growth through traditional disciplines of the faith such as prayer and Bible study. Consequently, the focus was primarily individualistic, and what was absent from the conversation was a consciousness of the role of the entire church community in the discipleship of members.

In this article, I aim to examine core aspects of Anabaptist and Baptist ecclesiology and pneumatology and their potential for inspiring a re-visioning of the role of the church community in discipleship. In doing so, I will explore how the collective practices of the local church

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of ‘missional church’ had its origins in the Gospel and our Culture Network which was comprised of a group of missiologists from various denominations who were inspired by the writings of Lesslie Newbigin and his observations concerning the church’s role and mission in the changing face of western culture. This resulted in the seminal work *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. by Darrell L. Guder, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998). This was the first of many works addressing these challenges in the last two decades. This has also inspired the further work of many engaged in ministry and church planting endeavours. In Scandinavia the main church planting organisation has its roots in the D.A.W.N. movement (Discipling A Whole Nation) and has resulted in the training of church planters and annual church planting conferences (Sendt Konferansen, <<https://sendtnorge.no/om-sendt-norge>> [accessed 29 March 2022]). The ministry of Fresh Expressions from the UK (<<https://freshexpressions.org.uk>> [accessed 29 March 2022]) has also been a source of inspiration for church planters in Scandinavia.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

are sacramental in nature<sup>4</sup> because they are the embodiment of the participation of the church in the life of the triune God and are instrumental in the *missio Dei* as the church lives and serves within the world. A helpful definition of sacraments is provided by Anthony R. Cross, who describes them as ‘the Word of God in action which must be responded to in the act of participating. Sacraments are, quite simply, means of grace.’<sup>5</sup> Therefore, sacramental practices can be understood as embodied expressions of life in Christian community, which are at once both redemptive and transformational. At the same time, while infused by the life of the Spirit at work, they come to expression in the realm of human communities of faith that live in a consciousness of the hope of the eschaton, where only then will the completion of the path of discipleship be fully realised.

I first turn to the Anabaptist concept of discipleship, as their theology and practice continues to influence Free Church traditions, including Baptists.

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<sup>4</sup> Baptists have frequently been understood to hold a non-sacramental view of the practices and life of the church. However, extensive research has demonstrated convincingly that Baptists have historically and theologically held sacramental views of not merely baptism and the Lord’s Supper but also of the collective ministry of the church, including communal discernment, the study of scripture, preaching, prayer, and the varieties of ministry performed by church members. Baptist sacramentalism finds its basis in Baptist ecclesiology which emphasises that the church is a local (and visible) gathered community of regenerate believers living in fellowship with one another under the Lordship of Christ. Several anthologies describing what has become known as ‘Baptist Sacramentalism’ have been published within the series *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* in 2003, 2008, and 2020 (*Baptist Sacramentalism: Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Vol.1, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003; Vol. 2, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008; Vol. 3, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020)). A sacramental view of believers’ baptism was researched by G.R. Beasley-Murray in his work, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1960) but also by other British Baptist theologians such as A. Gilmore (*Christian Baptism*, ed. by Gilmore (London: Lutterworth, 1959)) Neville Clark, and R.E.O. White. More recent contributions have been the research of Stanley K. Fowler in *More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), and Anthony R. Cross in *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Great Britain* (Carlisle, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2000) and *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament: Baptisma Semper Reformandum* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony R. Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, p. 189.

## Anabaptist Views on Discipleship

Harold S. Bender has identified three main features characterising ‘the Anabaptist vision’ where he identifies ‘discipleship’ or ‘following’ (*Nachfolge Christi*) as the most central identifying feature of Christianity for Anabaptists.<sup>6</sup> Sixteenth-century Anabaptists insisted that salvation should be evidenced in a radically transformed mode of life caused by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. The true indication of sincere faith was perceived to be a covenant of discipleship where the life of the believer was fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ. A fundamental realignment of the human will was necessary in order for the will of God to be accomplished in the life of the earnest believer. Anabaptists agreed with Protestants that salvation has its origins in the divine initiative of God when received in faith, but they also insisted that spiritual regeneration must be manifested in visibly righteous lives. They emphasised faith and grace, but were convinced that the grace believers received in faith should be applied and revealed in their conduct and relationships.<sup>7</sup> The grace of God was perceived as a present living power working transformation in the lives of sinners, where obedience to the word of God was an outworking of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the sincere believer. Good works performed by believers were not a means to earn salvation, but rather the result of believers yielding to the power of God at work within them. The ‘yielding’ or ‘abandonment’ of human beings to the divine will of God in their obedience is expressed by the word ‘*Gelassenheit*’.<sup>8</sup> Arnold C. Snyder describes this concept and how it came to expression in practice:

Anabaptists believed that human beings had to respond to God’s call. They had to yield inwardly to the Spirit of God, outwardly to the community and to outward discipline, and finally in the face of a hostile world, believers might have to ‘yield’ by accepting a martyr’s death. The necessary unity

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<sup>6</sup> Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944), pp. 20–21; 26–28.

<sup>7</sup> Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> This term is difficult to translate adequately because it lacks a corresponding word in the English language. It has several nuances that when combined together result in the Anabaptist understanding of the word.

between the inner life of believers and their outer lives of discipleship and community life is seen here again.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the second main feature of the Anabaptist vision was voluntary church membership based on true conversion and a commitment to holy living.<sup>10</sup> This was marked and evidenced by their voluntary choice to be baptised as believers. Anabaptist opposition to infant baptism was closely connected to their disavowal of the state church, and their insistence upon voluntary church membership. Another key aspect of the Anabaptist commitment to radical discipleship of believers was the principle of *'Absonderung'*, which involved the gathering of true Christians into communities that were separated from worldly society and characterised by true Christian fellowship and love. This love in the fellowship was expressed in the mutual sharing of possessions to meet the needs of others and in their mutual commitment to discipleship.<sup>11</sup> This principle of separation applied to all aspects of life and was key to Anabaptist understanding of the true nature of the church.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, this radical approach to discipleship and non-conformity to the world frequently resulted in the violent persecution of Anabaptists, which they perceived to be a natural consequence of their choice to follow Christ. C. Arnold Snyder states,

The ultimate test of one's renunciation and 'contempt for the world' was the willingness to accept death rather than renounce one's faith and so dishonour one's Lord. The 'baptism of blood' was a daily mortification of the flesh, in preparation for the ultimate sacrifice, if such was needed.<sup>13</sup>

This is why the third feature of the 'Anabaptist vision' for Bender was the willingness to accept violent persecution and martyrdom (the baptism in blood), which also meant the practice of an absolute form of pacifism and non-resistance in the face of violence. Bender sees these three features of 'the Anabaptist vision' as expressions of their

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<sup>9</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> The original practices of shared economy are still a feature of many Anabaptistic communities of faith today.

<sup>12</sup> Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, pp. 27–29.

<sup>13</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, p. 369.

desire to regenerate true Christianity, and to live the life of love which they considered to be the ‘fullness of the Christian life ideal’.<sup>14</sup>

Thomas N. Finger organises historic and current Anabaptist thought around ‘the New Creation’ as an interpretive centre, encompassing three ‘inseparable dimensions – personal, communal, and missional’.<sup>15</sup> While Bender emphasises ‘discipleship’ or ‘following’ as an interpretive key to Anabaptist theology and practice, Finger claims that Anabaptist concepts of soteriology were transformational in character and intrinsic to their views of the church as the ‘New Creation’.<sup>16</sup> Finger cites Balthasar Hubmaier in his description of spiritual regeneration as ‘the incorruptible seed, or divine Word that makes us turn green, grow, blossom and bring forth fruit’, and concludes that Hubmaier describes justification not in forensic terms, but rather in the language of ‘ontological transformation’.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, he presents the concept of ‘divinisation’ as a central characteristic of early Anabaptist soteriology.<sup>18</sup> For Finger, ‘divinisation’ is closely linked to believers being reckoned as righteous while still sinners. This can best be understood when considered in an eschatological perspective because in Christ they *already* participate in the new creation’s righteousness. He states,

God reckons us righteous because (on the basis) of this One in whom we participate through grace, not the imperfect righteousness (or content) we derive from it. This notion, however, is really ontological, a participation in renewing divine reality.<sup>19</sup>

Finger further explains that divinisation ‘was not transformation of human reality into another kind of reality (divine) but transformation

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<sup>14</sup> Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas N. Finger provides a comprehensive examination of the views of the various groups represented at the time of the radical reformation in the 16th century and a thorough description of differences in origins and influences present at that time.

<sup>17</sup> Alvin Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, NL: B. De Graf, 1977), p. 72. Cited by Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p.114.

<sup>18</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, pp. 51–54. Anabaptist soteriology had varying degrees of emphasis upon divinisation which Finger discusses at length from p. 121ff.

<sup>19</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p. 155.

by divine reality of those who remain truly human'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, this does not imply that Anabaptists believed that they achieved a sinless divine state, but that they believed they had received in their salvation the power and grace to live holy lives. This also came to expression in the institution of 'the ban', or 'the rule of Christ' in accordance with Matthew 18:15–18. The earnest desire to restore Christian community to its faithfulness to the New Testament ideal was the motivation for this emphasis upon a corporate and covenantal commitment to mutual admonition and correction.<sup>21</sup> This was a key characteristic of almost all early Anabaptist faith communities<sup>22</sup> and considered to be a constitutive element of the true church.<sup>23</sup> The mutual commitment to communal discipline was also intrinsic to the personal vows expressed in the sacrament of believers' baptism.<sup>24</sup> Franklin H. Littell states,

The idea of a covenantal relation to God and one's fellows became the foundation of the Anabaptist community and through it came the use of the Ban (spiritual government). The Anabaptists said repeatedly that true baptism was that submission to the divine authority described in 1 Peter 3:18–22, the responsibility of a good conscience toward God. They saw that this couldn't be done easily in this kind of a world, but required brotherly admonition and exhortation, the practice of intentional fellowship.<sup>25</sup>

This is an indication that there were no illusions concerning a sinless state of believers, but there was a strong consciousness of the

<sup>20</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> In his description of the communal dimension of 'the New Creation', Finger sees the practice of, and submission to, church discipline as integral to the practice of the sacraments and inherent to the baptismal vow (*A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, pp. 208–233). Kenneth R. Davis ('No Discipline, No Church: An Anabaptist Contribution to the Reformed Tradition', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 13, no. 4 (1982), 43–58 (pp. 43–45)) also describes church discipline or 'the ban' as essential to the 'being' of the church and a core feature of the Swiss Anabaptist's communal practices from the beginning, referring also to the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Jean Runzo which also supports this claim (p. 45; see below).

<sup>22</sup> Jean Runzo, 'Communal Discipline in the Early Anabaptist Communities of Switzerland, South and Central Germany, Austria, and Moravia, 1525–1550' (doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1978), pp. 218–22.

<sup>23</sup> William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p. 209. See also Davis, 'No Discipline, No Church', pp. 43–45.

<sup>25</sup> Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, 2nd edn (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), p. 85.

importance of mutual support and accountability in the discipleship of believers within churches. Holy conduct was not merely a personal matter but a concern for the local congregation because there was a strong emphasis on community identity as ‘a new creation’.<sup>26</sup>

When considering the communal aspect of discipleship, Finger takes as his starting point believers’ baptism, stating,

Since baptism incorporated one into the church, personal faith was initially, necessarily, and therefore intrinsically actualized in a communal context. Moreover, the communities’ continuing call to believers’ baptism propelled them into mission and thereby a unique relationship with society.<sup>27</sup>

According to Finger, the communal practices of the church were not merely based on relationships within a church but were rooted in their participation in the life of the triune God:

The four Anabaptist practices – baptism, Lord’s supper, discipline, and economic sharing – were intrinsic to church life not simply because God commanded them. They were essential for whole persons to submit themselves humbly to God and each other, and to be indwelt by God. These actions were not simply human but were rooted in God’s triune dynamism. In a sacrament like baptism, the Son was enacting externally through its form, what the Father, as Spirit, was simultaneously performing internally in the baptizand. This triune interaction interwove water with Spirit and baptizands, body and spirit, into the divinizing dynamic. This is why baptism, following Jesus’ command employed the triune formula.<sup>28</sup>

Believers’ baptism testifies to the new birth, incorporates believers into the new creation, and provides the foundation for communal discernment, discipline, and economic sharing. Believers’ baptism was also that which provided the foundation for the church’s missionary engagement in the world. As such, it was ‘personal, but by no means “individualistic”’.<sup>29</sup> Here the personal, communal, and missional aspects of Anabaptist ecclesiology and discipleship intertwined, revealing contours of an emphasis which provided an

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<sup>26</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, pp. 157, 209.

<sup>27</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p. 166.

<sup>29</sup> Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, p. 169.



approach to discipleship which came to expression in the practices of communities of faith.

## Early Baptist Theology of Communal Discipleship

The passion for biblical faithfulness was also the driving force for early Baptists and other Separatist groups in their attempts to define their ecclesiology.<sup>30</sup> The first leaders of those who came to be known as Baptists were John Smyth (1554–1612) and Thomas Helwys (1575–1616). Both Smyth and Helwys emphasised that a true apostolic church was to be constituted through the conscious confession of faith by individuals who freely chose to enter into Christ through believers' baptism and to be comprised of believers living in covenantal relationship to God and to one another. As early as 1607, and while still a separatist, John Smyth wrote in his *Principles and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church* that

a visible communion of Saints is of two, three, or more Saints joyed together by covenant with God & themselves, freely to vse al the holy things of God, according to the word, for their mutual edification, & God's glory. Mat. 18 20 Deut. 29, 12. &c Psal 147, 19 & 149, 6-9. Rev. 1. 6. This visible communion of Saints is a visible Church. Mat. 18. 20, Act. 1, 15. & 2. 1 41, 42, 46.<sup>31</sup>

He held that the local church had everything that it needed to be defined as a true church and that Christ's authority and ministerial power were afforded to the gathered community of believers. Smyth also argues for this vigorously in his *Paralleles, Censures, Observations* from 1609.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas Helwys wrote in 1611, in his *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland*,

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<sup>30</sup> C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> William Thomas Whitley, *The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ's College, 1592-8*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 1, p. 252.

<sup>32</sup> Whitley, *The Works of John Smyth*, 2, pp. 465–66.

that the church of CHRIST is a company off faithful people 1 Cor. 1.2, Eph. 1.1, separated fro the world by the word & Spirit of GOD. 2 Cor. 6.17, being kint [joined] unto the LORD, & one unto another, by Baptisme. 1 Cor.12.13. Upon their owne confessio of the faith. Act. 8.37 and sinnes. Mat 3:6.<sup>33</sup>

And further in Article 13 he writes the following:

That everie Church is to receive in all their members by Baptisme vpon the Confession off their faith and sinnes wrought by the preaching off the Gospel, according to the primitive instruction. Matt. 28:19. And practice, Acts 2:41. And therefore Churches constituted after anie other manner, or off anie other persons are not according to CHRISTES Testament.<sup>34</sup>

Believers' baptism marked entrance into the church, and life in regenerate Christian community was to be gathered and centred in their corporate covenant relationship to the triune God and to one another. Marvin Jones describes the consequences of covenantal theology for Thomas Helwys's ecclesiology thus:

When believers join together in covenanted churches, they have entered the inner life of the Trinity corporately. The Godhead is the source of eternal life for the individual believer and the source of life and headship for the church. [...] The pastor, individual officers, and members serve the Lord and one another under the Lordship of Christ in his church.<sup>35</sup>

Here one sees that the trinitarian, covenantal, and communal aspects of Anabaptist discipleship were also key features of early Baptist ecclesiology. Consequently, the shared life in the triune God was not merely the object of their eschatological hope, but a vital and present reality for the church. The strong emphasis on the visible embodiment of faith in the lives of believers previously witnessed in sixteenth-century Anabaptists is also evidenced in Smyth's description of 'the true Churches of Christ' as, 'established of men that did repent & beleeve, and shew their faith by their workes, that were Saints & faithful visiblie: & of these only'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> Marvin Jones and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Beginning of Baptist Ecclesiology: The Foundational Contributions of Thomas Helwys*, Monographs in Baptist History, Vol 6 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> Whitley, *The Works of John Smyth*, 2, 464.

This also required that they cultivated close fellowship with one another, and that personal oversight of congregants was expected of the elders of the church. This also meant that church discipline was an essential aspect of church life and that there were limitations to the size of churches in order to ensure faithfulness in these practices.<sup>37</sup> The later London Confession of 1644 echoes the original convictions of both Smyth and Helwys, where article XXXIII makes the following statement:

That Christ hath here on earth a spirituall Kingdome, which is the Church, which He hath purchased and redeemed to Himselfe, as a peculiar inheritance: which Church, as it is visible to us, is a company of visible saints, called & separated from the world, by the Word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joynd to the Lord, and each other, by mutuall agreement, in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances, commanded by Christ their head and King. 1) 1 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1 2) Rom. 1:1; Acts 26:18; 1 Thes. 1:9; 2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:18 3) Acts 2:37 with Acts 10:37 4) Rom. 10:10; Acts 2:42; 20:21; Mat. 18:19, 20; 1 Peter 2:5.<sup>38</sup>

It is also clear from this confession that while early Baptists had a strong Christological understanding of the true nature of the church, they were solidly anchored in a trinitarian belief in God.<sup>39</sup> The practices of worship, teaching and preaching of scripture, prayer, and the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's supper) were essential to church life in addition to spiritual oversight and mutual support, which were key to the nurture and guidance of believers.

Philip E. Thompson also provides us with a renewed consciousness of the role of the church for early Baptists in the spiritual formation of disciples. This is a result of his recognition of the unfortunate legacy of the 'punctiliar, voluntarist, individualist, and conversionist' revivalist soteriology of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists. He seeks to draw upon early Baptist theologians to recover their emphasis upon spiritual formation within the realm of corporate worship in the life of the believing community. He claims that

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<sup>37</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> See articles I and II (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p.156).

early Baptists were shaped by Reformed theology in emphasising the absolute ontological and epistemological ‘gap’ between the Creator and the created, and consequently sought to guard against human presumption and vanity in their knowledge of God.<sup>40</sup> This comes consistently to expression in the first articles of the earliest Baptist confessions of faith. The London Confession of 1644 of Particular Baptists states

that God as He is himself cannot be comprehended of any but himself, dwelling in that inaccessible light, that no eye can attain unto, whom never man saw, nor can see; that there is but one God, one Christ, one Spirit, one Faith, one Baptisme, one rule of holinesse and obedience to be observed.<sup>41</sup>

The Standard Confession of General Baptists from 1660 states in Article I that

We believe and are verily confident that there is but one God the Father of whom are all things, from everlasting to everlasting, glorious, and unwordable in all his attributes.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, for early Baptists, the revelation of God was not perceived as something occurring within the individual soul but was believed to be mediated primarily within the realm of the communal practices of worship.

The church is the locus of God’s presence, Christ indwells the church by the Holy Spirit, and through the Spirit the church is the habitation of God.<sup>43</sup> In addition, he refers to Particular Baptist Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), who emphasised that while personal and family worship was to be encouraged, it was truly within the realm of the corporate worship of the gathered community that the spiritual edification of its members was effectuated through God’s presence in their midst. In the section addressing public worship he writes,

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<sup>40</sup> Philip E. Thompson, ‘Practicing the Freedom of God: Formation in Early Baptist Life’, in *Theology and Lived Christianity*, ed. by David M. Hammond, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, vol. 45 (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications/Bayard, 2000), p. 123.

<sup>41</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 156.

<sup>42</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 225.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, ‘Practicing the Freedom of God’, p. 123 refers to Grantham’s *Christianism Primitivus or Ancient Christian Religion*, Book 2, part 1, chapter 2, section 11.

Here is most of God's gracious presence (as one observes it), His *effectual presence*: 'In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee' (Ex. 20:24). Here is more of his *intimate presence*: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). He walks in the midst of seven golden candlesticks [representing the churches] Rev. 1:13.<sup>44</sup>

The faith formation and edification of the members of the church was also seen to be instrumental in their corporate ministry to the surrounding community as well. This was accomplished through the corporate habits of virtue, which were infused with the grace of the Spirit and effectuated the spiritual transformation of members through the love of Christ. Thompson states,

As the Church and its members were formed in the image of God's love, Christ, God's redemptive work in and toward the Church became of one piece with God's work beyond the Church.<sup>45</sup>

## Covenantal and Trinitarian Ecclesiology

Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes emphasises the historical central influence of covenantal theology when describing key features of early Baptist ecclesiology and identity.<sup>46</sup> According to Fiddes, the mutual covenant within a local congregation is at once both horizontal and vertical, and is founded upon the gracious inclusion of the gathered community within the triune relationship of the Godhead. Fiddes comments,

As God the Father makes covenant of love eternally with the Son in the fellowship of the Spirit, so simultaneously God makes covenant in history

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church* (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2018), p. 22, article 10:4. Emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, 'Practicing the Freedom of God', pp. 132–33.

<sup>46</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 21–47.

with human beings. In one movement of utter self-giving God elects both the divine Son and human children as covenant partners.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, Fiddes presents a trinitarian model that emphasises *participation* in the life of the Trinity that is based on the concept of perichoresis. He understands the perichoretic ‘dance’ to be ‘movements of relationship’ within the Trinity, where one perceives this in terms of the patterns of the dance itself, ‘an interweaving of ecstatic movements’.<sup>48</sup> He dismisses any attempts to found a trinitarian theology through drawing an analogy between human and divine ‘persons’, claiming that ‘the closest analogy between the triune God and human existence created in the image of this God is not in persons, but in the *personal relationships* themselves’. Consequently, he insists that we not merely encourage an *imitation* of the life of the Trinity, but rather conceive of life in the Christian community as *participation* in the ‘places opened out within the interweaving relationships of God’.<sup>49</sup> The participation of the church in the relational flow of the triune God is founded in the covenantal relationship that God has made with his people and based upon the professed faith of each of its members. Fiddes insists that a local church is then never comprised of an incidental gathering of individuals, but rather a gathered community under the direct rule of Christ.<sup>50</sup> This relationship of the disciples to the triune God is clearly manifested in the sending of the disciples by Jesus in John 20:21–22, where they are also entrusted with the authority inherent to that relationship. According to Fiddes, the movement within the relationships of the Trinity is always a ‘*movement of sending*’ and is therefore both the impetus and source for the mission of the Triune God in the world through his church. He states,

A triune doctrine of God encourages us to discover our roles as we participate in a God who is always in the movement of sending. The One who sends out the Son eternally from the womb of his being sends the Son

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<sup>47</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 36.

<sup>48</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 72.

<sup>49</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>50</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participation in God*, pp. 86–88.

into the world, and Christ after his resurrection from the dead says to his followers: ‘as the Father has sent me, so I send you’.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the sending of the disciples is the natural extension of the missional ‘sending’ occurring within the Trinity itself. God the Father sends his Son who sends his Spirit through his Church into the world. Far from being mere imitation, participation in the movement of sending involves the actual representation of Jesus in their acts.<sup>52</sup> As such, the church community is essential to the mission of God in the world, and its communal practices are vital to the formation of disciples who are commissioned by the triune God to do his will. It is precisely within this interweaving of relationships that we can situate the true source of effective power which infuses sacramental practices with salvific grace. If we take Jesus at his word, that ‘where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’ (Matt 18:20), it is within the realm of this common life in fellowship with the triune God that the practices of the church emerge and can be described as sacramental.

### **Sacramental Practices of the Believing Community**

When considering what constitutes a Baptist approach to faith formation through the sacramental practices of the church, the starting point must always be the triune God himself. It is the triune God who graciously calls a people to himself and includes them in the outworking of his redemptive plan for all of creation. The practices of the community gain their sacramental effectiveness because they flow from the life of the triune God in their midst. Discipleship then, is not merely an intellectual endeavour, nor primarily accomplished through participation in liturgical practices,<sup>53</sup> but most fundamentally is relational and communal.

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<sup>51</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participation in God*, p. 51.

<sup>52</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participation in God*, p. 51.

<sup>53</sup> The formative role of liturgical practices in the process of discipleship is an emphasis of James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

I would like to suggest that it is this adjustment in perspective concerning the situation of the agency of spiritual power associated with formative practices which needs to occur. It is within the regenerate community of the faithful, in the power of the Spirit as they participate in the life and activity of the triune God in their corporate life, that sacramental practices become means of grace in both incorporating disciples into the Church and providing the spiritual nurture for growth in maturity as disciples. This shift in focus moves the effectiveness of sacramental acts from the acts themselves to the Holy Spirit working within the regenerate believing community enacting these practices. The common life of the Spirit in the community is that which makes sacramental acts constitutive of the church's life and existence, where new members are incorporated into the fellowship through believers' baptism and are sustained and strengthened in their faith in the sharing of the Lord's Supper. At the same time, other practices can indeed be classified as effective sacramental means of grace, such as prayer, the preaching and teaching of scripture, or the gathering of the church meeting as they seek direction under the lordship of Christ in their practice of common discernment. Hospitality, which involves the breaking of bread with 'the other', involves table fellowship which serves to break down the walls of separation between people and invites participation in the life of Christ who is present and presiding at the table.

The challenge for communities of faith today is to realise the sacramental and formative potential found within the tapestry of life's activities and practices, while also carefully taking into consideration the cultural factors that pose challenges to transformative discipleship. Current negative cultural trends can be seen to foster both individualism and isolation, but the need for human relationships and community is fundamental to our human condition. While Western cultures glorify individualism, this stands in diametrical opposition to the collective and communal ethos of church community and serves to foster both a consumerist and isolationist form of Christianity which rarely effectuates transformational discipleship. This is often exaggerated by the reluctance of many to commit themselves as members within church communities and by a lack of stable constancy in service and attendance.



Finding creative ways to strengthen the communal and relational aspect of discipleship can help churches realise the transformational power found within the sphere of covenantal relationships characterised by the grace and unconditional love of the triune God. The grace and love extended and shared is also essential to what it means to be a disciple of Christ engaged in the ‘ministry of reconciliation’ as missional agents in the world.

### **Believers’ Baptism**

The scope of this article does not allow for an extensive discussion of the sacrament of believers’ baptism and its relation to discipleship. However, it is essential to emphasise that it is fundamental to all of the other sacramental practices of the church because it is constitutive for the church’s life and practices. John E. Colwell states this emphatically in the foreword to Anthony R. Cross’s *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*:

The only gospel appeal we find within the New Testament is the appeal to believe the gospel, to repent, and to be baptised, this baptism linked to the promise of the Spirit. A man or a woman is ‘in Christ’ by virtue of being baptised into Christ. The Church is the body of Christ by virtue of its members being baptised into Christ [...] It is baptism that is defining of the Christian. It is baptism that is defining of the Church.<sup>54</sup>

Within that work, Cross describes New Testament baptism as ‘faith baptism’, and the ‘sacrament of faith’.<sup>55</sup> What distinguishes a sacramental view of believers’ baptism is that its effectiveness is derived from the faith response of the individual to the gracious self-disclosure of God within the community of the faithful. He argues this convincingly through a thorough examination of New Testament passages referring to water baptism, stating that ‘it is clear, therefore, that God’s gift to faith and baptism is one, namely salvation in Christ. This is what Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21, “baptism [...] now saves you”’.<sup>56</sup> The essential link between the conscious faith response of believers to

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<sup>54</sup> John Colwell, ‘Foreword’, in Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, xiii.

<sup>55</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, p. 60.

the gospel of Christ and baptism into the body of Christ is accompanied by the promise of the Holy Spirit to those who believe. In entering the baptismal waters in faith, believers are incorporated into Christ and the regenerate community of faith — his body. Herein lies the wellspring of the life and ministry of the church as well as of its individual members.

### **Practising the Sharing of the Lord's Supper**

The covenantal unity between believers and the triune God comes to expression and is embodied in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Jesus invites believers to participate in this meal as a commemoration of his death and his sacrifice for our sin. At the same time, believers gather in unity at the table in humble acknowledgement of their common need for his grace and forgiveness. The meal shared is also a shared proclamation of the eschatological hope of the people of God. It is a missional event.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, 'communion expresses the terms on which the Christian community is to live out its life'.<sup>58</sup> It is linked with discipleship. We celebrate communion in the consciousness of his presence at the table through his Spirit who shapes our convictions and ministry. The fellowship that we share at the communion table should naturally be seen as a means of grace in that our participation motivates and enables the inclusion and participation of others. One example of this inclusive nature of communion, reflecting Christ-like life, is the practice of hospitality.

There are few of our practices that embody the Spirit of Christ more than our hospitality, not merely for one another, but even more expansively to include the stranger. In a time of history that is characterised by religious and ethnic strife, where millions of people are driven and displaced from their homes, it has been evident among many European Baptist churches that measures must be taken to attempt to address the needs of migrants in a multitude of ways.<sup>59</sup> Private

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 146-147.

<sup>58</sup> Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), p. 109.

<sup>59</sup> See also Peter F. Penner, *Ethnic Churches in Europe: A Baptist Response* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2006).

hospitality has been extended and new friends have been made as Christians have responded to the needs of those alone in their new cultural setting. The church becomes a new family. Communities of faith have experienced that these practices have resulted in the inclusion of new members as they have responded both to the call of the gospel and to the love manifested in the life of Christian communities of faith.

Hospitality can be practised more intentionally within families, where, in continuity with Jewish tradition, gathering at the sabbath table in the home is a central worship practice and place of faith formation. Christian families gather at table with the consciousness of the presence of Christ through his Spirit as we gather in his name. If we envisage hospitality as the ‘warp and weft’ of family life, it can open doors for spontaneous celebrations of the ordinary as we extend hospitality to others. Hospitality can also manifest itself through programmes initiated by churches that are geared to extend needed support to families and children. Church fellowships can take intentional measures to build relationships *between* families in their midst. Ideally, this can provide a network of significant relationships between children and other adults that can be formative in contributing to their growth as disciples of Christ. However, this can only be born out of a common vision for what the triune God can work within the realm of hospitable sharing. The measures taken for hospitable inclusion must be extended to all people of all ages. Examples of this include both single adults and the elderly. Churches should strive to facilitate inclusion within the many areas of ministry that would benefit from the insight and wisdom of those who have years of life experience as disciples of Christ. At the same time, ministries of mercy and care are means of manifesting the love of Christ in visitation, prayer, and practical assistance for those beyond their years of active ministry.

## **Conclusion**

In raising questions concerning discipleship and faith formation, it is clear that the Baptist theological tradition has a unique communal emphasis which emerges from their vision for the church. The earliest Baptist pioneers provide us with insight into their belief in the

transformational power of the Holy Spirit at work within the regenerate community of faith. In doing so, they also provide us with a foundation for both evaluating and shaping Christian community through the practices that embody and infuse our common life in Christ with his life and presence. The sacramental practices that are formative for discipleship in Christian community derive their effective power through the common participation of the community of faith in the relational life of the triune God. The communal and relational aspects of discipleship are grounded in the covenantal relationship of life and transformational salvific grace in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The church community lives, moves, and has its being in the realm of covenantal relationships in its corporate relationship to its head. The church is called to embody the life of the Trinity while participating in the unfolding of the eternal eschatological drama that seeks continually and gracefully to include others in the perichoretic dance of the triune God. This is embodied in the sacramental practices of the believing community.