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Editorial

Toivo Pilli

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This issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* includes five articles that invite readers to reflect on theology, spirituality, and history from a Baptist perspective. It was not difficult to decide which of them should be the opening text: Ruth Gouldbourne's fundamentally important study — or essay, if you prefer — touches on the question of good and bad theology. The author goes beyond personal preferences in her analysis and argues that one challenge is to avoid doing theology that claims absolute truth in order to silence or exclude other voices. 'A theology that recognises its own position, claims its validity as a perspective from which to do theology, and also makes room for other voices and contexts is [...] a theology that offers genuine possibility and vitality of discourse.' This is a helpful criterion for everyone who is engaged in a serious attempt to think and speak theologically. The author is convinced that distinguishing between better and worse theologies, and striving towards creative and productive ways of doing theology, 'matters academically, ecclesially, and in the political and ethical life of the world.' This article sets the background, the canvas, for the rest of the texts that bring their own shades of colour to the issue.

Tim Noble's article focuses on the challenges of transformative mission through an examination of the four gospel accounts of the resurrection experiences of Mary Magdalene. Even though the stories have different emphases, they all require imagination to envisage the transformed life in Christ, 'and the only response to that is to share it with others, to bring them to a new way of seeing'. Here, a new aspect of being a missionary opens up: making oneself redundant. The mission itself goes on. And yet, for the individual missionary, the ultimate aim is to hear that people have reached their own personal and transformative encounter with the risen Lord, as the Samaritans say in the Gospel of

John, chapter 4. Noble concludes, ‘There can be no greater complement to the missionary than this, and this is the story of Mary Magdalene, the first missionary of the risen Lord.’

Mission, or more specifically ‘evangelism’, is the subject of the article by Nicholas DiMauro. He approaches his topic from a slightly unexpected angle, at least for a reader in a baptistic tradition: contemplative spirituality and centring prayer. DiMauro argues that the practice of centring prayer can rebalance ‘personal devotion with the believer’s call to mediate God to others’. He argues that centring prayer ‘could enrich the spiritual lives of Baptists and offer a meaningful avenue for connection to those outside the faith’ — especially New Age practitioners.

It is significant that this issue of *JEBS* includes an article by Linda Aadne, a recent PhD graduate of IBTS Amsterdam. She analyses how the debate on baptismal theology in the mid-twentieth century influenced Nils Engelsen, a Norwegian Baptist theologian. The debate was ignited largely by two Swiss theologians: Emil Brunner, who focused on the divine-human encounter, and Karl Barth, who based his views on Christology. Both were critical of infant baptism. Engelsen found much in common between Brunner’s and Barth’s theologies and his own convictions. Nevertheless, he emphasised that baptism is a relational symbol, adding to his views a touch of ‘sacramental realism’. He offers ‘a constructive alternative to both sacramental objectivism and revivalist subjectivism’. Engelsen was seeking a way forward in discussions about baptismal theology in a context where infant baptism remained culturally predominant in the Norwegian Lutheran society. Aadne’s article is not only an interesting piece of historical research but also illuminates how theological conversation across different Christian traditions can work constructively in a Baptist context.

The last article in this sequence is also historical, exploring the story of Estonian Baptist theological education from 1922 to 1989, from the establishment of the theological seminary, through years under atheistic restrictions, and until its reopening after the pressures of the Soviet regime. The authors, Toivo Pilli and Merlin Kontus, argue that theological education was and is part of Estonian Baptist identity,

although this commitment has taken different forms throughout history — from individual learning and reading to more formal forms of education. The article discusses another learning context that emerged during the Soviet period: friendship circles that did not follow any formal curriculum or programme. Instead, participants gave short presentations, used whatever literature was available, and in this way shaped the topics that were discussed. Personal relationships and learning experiences were equally important.

This volume of *JEBS* also contains a book review section in which both IBTS lecturers and research students provide short analytical summaries of recent literature, illuminating some developments in wider theological and more specifically in baptistic research. This is a helpful tool for everyone interested in selecting literature from the mass of publications: somebody has already done the initial ‘sifting’ and provided some guidance about the publications reviewed. This is useful both for researchers and for the general audience interested in fresh insights into theology and baptistic thought.

On Good and Bad Theology

Ruth Gouldbourne

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Abstract

Despite the challenges posed by contextual relativism, it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between better and worse theologies — and doing so matters academically, ecclesially, and in the political and ethical life of the world. This article acknowledges the postmodern challenge before identifying two forms of technical failure: theology that violates rational discourse, and theology severed from its own recognised sources. Beyond the technical, good theology is characterised by humility and openness to questioning and correction; any theology that forecloses such questioning is, by that fact, impoverished. Bad theology can be identified by its effects — its tendency to harm, to serve existing power structures uncritically, and to silence other voices. Reflexivity is proposed as a key criterion of adequacy. Finally, the article develops the concept of productive theology: rooted in Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, oriented towards human flourishing, and generative of genuine questions — a matter primarily of method and attitude, and thus compatible with deep faithfulness to the tradition.

Keywords

Theology; relativism; reflexivity; productive; flourishing

The Problem of Judgement in a Postmodern Context

In a postmodern context, the cultural and intellectual air we breathe, to say that something is good or bad is to invite an immediate challenge: ‘In your opinion.’ And it is true that my judgement on, for example, whether a particular novel is good or bad is necessarily shaped by my context and my preferences. Similarly, my conviction that an action or a position is good or bad can be argued to be a function of where I stand, whether I benefit from it or suffer because of it, whether it aligns with my values or challenges them. And since, as is now widely presumed, my values are themselves the product of my context, a broadly postmodern account would suggest that objective standards

become very difficult to ground — though this inference has been challenged by philosophers including Charles Taylor, Hilary Putnam, and Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work deserves engagement here.¹

This argument is especially powerful when we are considering issues that are themselves highly contested, about which there is very little general agreement, and into this category, we must place theology. In many Western European contexts, survey data suggests declining engagement with theological discourse as a meaningful framework — though the picture varies considerably between, say, Poland and Sweden.² The historical impact of theology may be important, and its effects on culture, architecture, and music can be discussed. But any discussion of doctrine, of God, of faith and of its demands and results, is, on this account, without grounding in anything substantive. By one reckoning at least, any engagement with theology in those terms is simply ‘bad’.

But for those of us for whom these terms do have meaning, those of us who have a content to give to the word ‘God’, and who have an existential stake in the impact of faith, its demands and its results, and a direct and personal connection to the history and culture that theology has shaped, theology is something we value. About theology we can, therefore, make value judgements: it matters to us whether the theology we are exploring, being offered, or ourselves producing is good or bad. And we want it to be good.

Why the Question Is Not Simple

My starting point was to note that such judgements are generally considered personal and contextual. In considering theology, we might therefore begin by saying that a theology I agree with is good, while one

¹ See for example, Simon Susen, ‘From Modern to Postmodern Epistemology? The “Relativist Turn”’, in *The Postmodern Turn in the Social Sciences*, by Susen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 40–63 (p. 40).

² See, for example Grace Davie, ‘Revisiting Secularization in Light of Growing Diversity: The European Case’, *Religions*, 14:9 (2023), 1119, doi:10.3390/rel14091119.

I disagree with is bad. That is, at least, somewhere to start. But it leaves several fundamental questions unanswered.

Why, for instance, do I agree or disagree? On what basis am I making this judgement? There are several possible answers. The theology I am considering might appear to me to contradict Scripture and/or tradition, and on those grounds, I might judge it to be bad. But the question immediately arises: On what basis am I reading and interpreting Scripture and tradition? The consideration of these sources is itself a theological act. Our hermeneutical principles will have a theological basis, even if that basis is unexamined. The tradition through which we read and by which we are formed will itself be drawing on a theology and practice which may be so deeply ingrained that we struggle to identify it as a tradition at all, rather than a self-evident way of seeing things. Thus, my judgement on whether a theology is good or bad is already theological, and how am I to judge whether the theological position from which I am making that judgement is itself good or bad?

Underlying all of this remains the question of how we are going to define 'good' and 'bad' at all. Is it simply a matter of preference? Or is there the possibility of something more, something that will actually give us tools to use in a world of violence, fear, beauty, and longing, where we want to be able to live authentically faithful lives, and to bless and serve our neighbours?

Now, it may be that the best we can do in our time and context is accept that there is no objective standard for good and bad, especially in theology, but only better or worse arguments within our communities of discourse; that a good theology is one that we are comfortable with, or one that emerges as a consensus among a community which we trust, or that enables such a community to function, while a bad theology is one that, for example, creates discord within such a community, or one that violates the basic assumptions of the community.

While there may be strengths in such a position, especially in a postmodern world, it does still leave open the question of how communities with differing theologies can converse in any way that is fruitful, and is not limited to slinging slogans at each other, or shunning each other as purveyors of bad theology.

Such shunning or avoidance may be our only option. But for the sake of this discussion, and in order to have a discussion at all, I am going to attempt to negotiate another path, and to suggest that there might be some trans-contextual criteria; that is, criteria that are more than simply within a community of discourse, that we can use to make tentative judgements on whether a theology is good or bad, or at the very least better or worse.

Two Ways a Theology Can Be Technically Bad

Having attempted to show why the question is not simple, I now want to identify two ways in which we can say, fairly quickly, that a theology is bad.

First, I suggest we can argue that a theology that does not abide by the rules of rational discourse and academic discussion is bad, which is to say ‘technically bad’. A theology that simply asserts ‘this is true because I believe it’, or ‘this is true because I read it in this text’, or that employs the method known as proof-texting (making an assertion and then quoting isolated biblical phrases or verses in support of it) is, at the very least in academic terms, a bad theology. It does not abide by the norms and conventions of theological discussion and debate. At this point, this is not to make any affirmation about whether such a theology is true or untrue; that is a further question. But it is bad theology in the sense that it cannot take its place in theological discussion: it cannot be argued with, tested, or developed. A theology that depends on unfounded assertion, on the distortion of texts, or that is in itself a refusal of discussion is ‘bad’ in the sense of being academically unacceptable.

The assertion that it should be possible to discuss theology using the techniques of rational discourse is itself, of course, a theological judgement. It is based on the theological conviction that our rationality enables us to think about the divine in ways that can be communicated, debated, and explored. Not all will agree with this, and there are theological traditions that reject the place of rationality. There are also serious theological objections to the limiting of theology to rational

discourse, and it is important to acknowledge these if rational discourse is to be pursued as one of the signs of a good theology. So, it is important that I make it clear that while I am valuing the capacity for rationality as one of the signs of a good theology, or rather, am suggesting that the rejection of rationality is one of the markers of a bad theology, this must be taken in concert with much else, and is not enough in and of itself. As I will say below, any attempt we make to speak of the divine is necessarily limited, and so rationality while a necessary condition, is not sufficient on its own.

Second, a theology, or, to be more precise, a Christian theology, that refuses to engage with the traditionally recognised sources can be judged bad, or faulty, because it is cut off from that which it is supposed to be exploring. Those sources, broadly speaking, are Scripture, the tradition of the church in its widest sense, the experience of Christian believers, and the human capacity to reason. Note that this definition of ‘bad’ is not based on using the sources in a way I personally agree with, or arriving at conclusions that match my own. Rather, such a theology is isolated from any consideration of those sources altogether. A theology not rooted in these sources, which is not the same as using them in ways I would endorse, or reaching my preferred conclusions, is, again, technically bad. It does not meet the criteria of ‘theology’ as generally understood in academic discourse, or indeed, and more importantly, in the life of the church.

Theology in the Life of the Church

Placing theology not only in academic discourse but also in the life of the church asks us more detailed questions about what makes a theology good or bad. Having outlined two ways in which we might consider a theology to be technically bad, particularly in an academic context, I now want to consider theology within the church context as well.

There is an important and fruitful academic discipline dedicated to exploring the works of great dramatists. The conversations around and exploration of the depths of Shakespeare’s texts, for instance, are important for understanding what he wrote, how he wrote it, the

connections with other writers, and the influence on those who followed. But if such discussions never engage with the actual production of the script on stage, by actors, in front of an audience, a vital dimension of the texts' meaning is lost.

This is a metaphor that cannot be pushed too far, but it does illuminate something important about theology. If theological discussion, even technically good discussion that is well constructed, rooted in the sources, and engaged with the continuing debates, is never, at some point and in some way, connected with the life of the Christian community in its variety, complexity, and intention to engage with the lives of actual people, then something vital is missing.

Thus, even before we ask what it means for theology to be connected to the life of the church or to individual believers, we have another criterion: a theology that is cut off not only from considering the experience of believers (as noted above) but from interacting with the lived experience of faith communities might also fairly be considered faulty. And lest this begins to sound like special pleading — as though theology can only be judged within a closed circle of academic and church discourse — I want to insist that theology is not simply an academic or ecclesiastical consideration.

There was a time, not so long ago, when it was confidently argued that religion would fade from public and private life, and therefore have no influence on society beyond the private interest of a few enthusiasts. It has become clear that this is not the case. The picture is uneven: while some regions display remarkable religious resurgence in public life, others — much of Western Europe, for instance — have continued to secularise, complicating the simple secularisation narrative.³ The impact of a particular form of Christian theology on the politics of the United States, the role and power of particular configurations of Islamic theology in several nations, and the rise of a blend of Hindu theology and nationalism in India, to name only the

³ The secularisation thesis is classically stated in Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967). Berger himself later substantially revised his position: see *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. by Peter Berger (Eerdmans, 1999).

most obvious, remind us that how people think and speak about the Transcendent matters not as some esoteric study, but in corridors of power and on streets and battlefields. Questions of good and bad theology matter not only in lecture rooms and pulpits, but as we seek to live together in a world facing a remarkable convergence of challenges. Good or bad theology has an impact on politics, economics, and matters of war and peace. I am writing this in a week when we have heard threats that ‘a great civilisation is going to be bombed out of existence’, and a so-called theological justification. There are theological justifications (to do with a particular understanding of the end of the world) being offered for this. Regardless of whether we judge this ‘good’ or ‘bad’, this is theology having an impact in the world. I suggest, therefore, that if theology is having life or death impacts, then it must be as good as we can make it.

This is, of course, nothing new, and I want to turn to a historical illustration of how such a judgement might be made, drawn from English history in the seventeenth century and, in a more accessible register, from a twentieth-century cartoon (Figure 1).

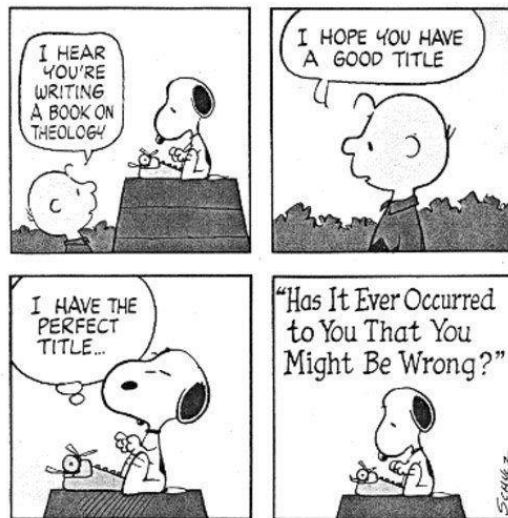


Figure 1. Peanuts cartoon strip by Charles Schulz. First published 9 August 1976.

Oliver Cromwell, writing to the church leaders of Scotland in 1650, said, 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.'⁴

James McClendon, as well as many others, begins a consideration of what it means to do theology with the importance of humility: the recognition that, as we attempt speech about God, we might be wrong in what we are affirming, or indeed in what we are denying. Cromwell, who it must be admitted was not himself well known for his humility, uses this phrase in an attempt to persuade the leaders of the Scottish Kirk that the position they have taken is wrong, is bad theology, and among the reasons he cites is the possibility that their position may cause others to stumble, and that it may exhibit what he calls 'carnal confidence upon misunderstood and misapplied precepts, which may be called spiritual drunkenness'. Their theology may, though Cromwell is careful to avoid saying it is what they intend, cause the downfall of some and an increase in their own pride. That is, the theology they are presenting has two flaws: it may harm others, and it is, Cromwell suggests, an expression of pride.⁵

Taking the latter point first: here is a criterion by which we may judge whether a theology is good or bad; can it be challenged? I have mentioned this briefly above, but I want to explore it more fully here, because it is less a flaw in the purely technical sense discussed earlier, and more a matter of attitude.

One influential model of scientific investigation, developed for example by Karl Popper, is the notion of hypothesis: an idea is explored by testing it, challenging it, asking questions of it, and allowing it to develop as new data, new possibilities, and new ways of looking emerge. This approach is humble, in that it does not begin from a conviction of

⁴ Cromwell to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 3 August 1650. Reprinted in, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, ed. by Thomas Carlyle, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1845), pp. 167–169.

⁵ James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Abingdon Press, 1986; rev. edn 2002), esp. ch. 1.

being absolutely right. The researcher is led not by the hypothesis, but by what is being studied; before it, she or he stands in wonder and tentativeness.⁶

I suggest that if this is one way we investigate creation, it might offer a model for how we investigate the Transcendent. The recognition that we are smaller than that about which we are attempting to speak, that our ideas are precisely that, our ideas, and that our capacity to understand will always be exceeded by that which we seek to understand, must mean that any statement we make, any affirmation we dare, and any action we take on the basis of those affirmations must always remain open to question, correction, and development. From within a tradition that values ongoing inquiry, any theology that claims to be the last word, or that denies further contribution, is problematic — though it should be acknowledged that traditions with strong doctrines of revealed truth will frame this very differently, on theological rather than merely stubborn grounds. We could argue that it is bad because it makes that which theology attempts to explore too small.

This invitation to consider that we might be wrong in our theology is not simply a matter of academic disputation. It is not a way of saying ‘I disagree with you, please consider that you might be mistaken’, for that would be to fall into precisely the trap we are trying to describe. Rather, it is the recognition that all theology is too limited, too small, and too circumscribed to be complete, because that which we are attempting to speak of is, in its fullness, beyond us by very definition. There may be degrees of better and worse in what we do theologically, but this recognition involves accepting that no theology is complete and absolute.

We can say, therefore, that any theology which cannot be questioned, which cannot be developed, or which demands acceptance as total and final is a bad theology. This is not primarily a matter of

⁶ For the Popperian account see Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Hutchinson, 1959). See also the EBSCO website, ‘The Logic of Scientific Discovery’, ebsco, 2022 <<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/logic-scientific-discovery-karl-popper>> [accessed 23 May 2026].

content or method; it is a matter of the attitude with which we do theology, and the attitude to which it leads. Good theology is and must be rooted in humility, and will in some way lead to greater humility and openness, because it will always lead to a greater apprehension of the divine and a deeper concern to understand our relationship to God.

Theology That Harms

Cromwell's second concern deserves more extended consideration. He suggests that a theology rooted in pride and leading to further pride will cause the downfall of other believers. This is a serious charge, and one we need to consider carefully. We can find, all too easily, instances in which theology is used as a weapon and as a means of asserting control. But if we take the call to humility seriously, then a theology that is used to harm another, or that carries the potential to harm another, has drifted far from that starting point. For the possibility of harming somebody else, whether in their own search to speak of the divine, in their capacity to live well, or by creating a context in which another is put at risk by our theology, does not emerge from a stance of humility. It emerges from a stance of pride; from a way of seeing in which other people's wellbeing matters less than our convictions or assumptions. To regard our convictions or assumptions as more significant than a human being is a disordering of priorities, particularly for a Christian theologian working with concepts of creation as image-bearing, and with the place of incarnation in understanding the nature of God.

But I suggest we can take this further. Bad theology is not only that which actively harms another. We can also consider a theology to be bad if it proceeds from, or occupies, a position of unexamined power and does not question that position. Critical traditions — from Marxist ideology critique to feminist and postcolonial theory — have made the question 'Who is being served here?' central to intellectual inquiry, and postmodern thinking has helped bring this into theological discourse.⁷

⁷ See, for example, A. Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (Bloomsbury, 2011).

The interrogation of whose power is being protected, and who is being silenced, has become an important practice in exploring the world, and is one of the tools we might use to reflect on the difference between better and worse theologies.

Theology is the attempt to speak of God and will inevitably reflect an understanding of the relationship between the divine, especially in Christian theology a divine creator and redeemer, and the ordering of the world. The God of Christian theology is regularly spoken of as exercising power. This is also, however, the God whose story centres on a man executed by the powers-that-be for subversion. This, at the very least, problematises the place of power in theology, and the relationship between theology and the structures of power in the world.

It becomes important, therefore, to ask whose power is being served by this theology, and how? A theology that aligns with or serves the interests of those whose power is already secure is one about which we need to ask searching questions. Of course, the whole issue of power is contested, and we also need to ask questions about a theology that refuses to engage with power, or that declines to accept the responsibilities that come with access to it through position or history. But perhaps we can suggest, as a broadly humane approach and with the proviso that we might ourselves be wrong, that a theology which reinforces the power of the already powerful, especially those empowered through inherited position or historical advantage, needs to be examined carefully.

We are moving here from the question of what bad theology is towards the question of what makes a theology go bad, and I suggest one of the answers is an approach that affirms existing positional and inherited power rather than questioning it.

We might look for example at the theology that was used to justify apartheid in South Africa, or slavery during the eighteenth century. The relationship between theology and power has always been contested; we can see it already in the questions to Jesus about the payment of tax, and in Paul's discussions of the powers that be in Romans 13, and the ongoing debates about this.

Perhaps one of the gifts of our postmodern generation is the space to ask this new question: In what ways might theology help us problematise and question assumptions about power in ways that lead to greater freedom, wellbeing, and flourishing? To move in this direction is to begin to ask what makes a theology good, and I will pause that discussion here in order to continue it later, after further exploring the dangers that power poses to theology.

The primary danger, I suggest, is that theology can be used to confirm my own power and support my assumption of centrality; a direct challenge, again, to the posture of humility I have been advocating. But the danger extends further. The question of the relationship between believers and the powers of the state is deeply contested. There are theologies on all sides of the debate, and indeed the whole debate is itself conducted in theological terms. Since the debate continues without resolution, we might fairly say there is no easy answer — and possibly no single, permanent answer.

However, I do believe we can distinguish between better and worse theologies in this debate, and that doing so will help us further explore the relationship between theology and power. The question remains: Whose interests are being served? Living and working in a postmodern context requires us, at the very least, to reflect on the relationship between the theology we are considering and the power structures of our society, and of our churches in particular. If the theology is secondary to those power structures and if it cannot bring critical questions to bear upon them, then we might reasonably assume it is deeply entangled with them. This may or may not make it a bad theology, but it opens up a territory worth exploring before a final judgement is made. This is not a simple question to answer; who is being served by any theology. But it is an important one to keep asking as we explore or develop a theological position.

Reflexivity and the Question of Voice

Such questioning brings us to another area of consideration: reflexivity. It is a given of theology that we speak from where we stand. We do all

our thinking, reading, reflecting, and speaking in the context in which we are formed and in which we live. It is also clear that particularly in the modern Western academy since the Enlightenment, theology has been dominated by privileged, Western, educated, and male voices, and their power in defining the canon has been overwhelmingly influential. Of course, there have always been other voices, but they have struggled to be heard.

In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with such a voice. The problem arises when it is taken to be, or asserts itself as, the only voice. While it is a valid voice, it is one voice among many. When it becomes the voice that silences other voices, it is claiming too much for itself.

It is relatively easy for someone in my position, a woman doing theology, to recognise at least some of the context in which she does it, and to know that this context is not shared by all, precisely because I am not the historic norm. I know that in speaking of God, I am not speaking as a white educated Western male. I am, rather, a white educated Western female; a small difference, but a real one. I suspect it is harder for those whose own voice coincides with the dominant voice to recognise that their voice is also contextual, just as everyone else's is. But such reflexivity matters. A theology that does not reflect on its own positionality, and does not allow itself to be open to other voices, experiences, and contexts, risks becoming so partial as to be damaged, and possibly damaging.

Even more significantly, where a theology, of any context, uses its claim to absolute truth to silence or exclude other voices, we are in the realm of bad theology: a theology that justifies treating the voice of its announcer as superior to, or of more worth than, other voices. Certain strands of masculinist theology that silence women, or white supremacist theology that silences voices from other ethnicities, are examples of this.

A theology that recognises its own position, claims its validity as a perspective from which to do theology, and also makes room for other voices and contexts is, by contrast, a theology that offers genuine possibility and vitality of discourse.

Towards Good Theology: Flourishing and Productivity

Here we begin to move from asking what makes a theology bad to asking what might constitute a good theology. I have already outlined part of an answer: a theology rooted in an attitude of humility is a necessary starting point. And I have hinted at another criterion I believe to be important: the promotion of wellbeing and flourishing.

This is perhaps best understood as the positive counterpart to the danger I outlined above — the danger of theology that harms. To consider it is to begin thinking about the actual content of theology, rather than just its form or impact.

Theology as practised by Christians is attempting to speak of the God encountered in Scripture and revealed in Jesus, however that encounter and that revelation are understood; the working out of what they mean is precisely the task of theology, and I am therefore trying not to prejudge what conclusions might be reached. There is, I believe, substantial, though, of course, not universal, agreement within the broad ecumenical mainstream that the intention of God in Scripture is for the good of creation, and that the ministry of Christ is oriented towards human flourishing however that is defined. I suggest therefore that we can take this as an important element in any consideration of the divine. And if it is important in that consideration, we are justified in expecting it to be important in the outcomes of that consideration. A theology can be considered good, therefore, if it contributes to human welfare and flourishing, however defined, and bad if it does not.

This leaves open the question of what human welfare and flourishing concretely look like, though the analysis of power above may be one place to begin thinking this through. We could reasonably turn, for example, to Miroslav Volf to see what this might look like. His work *Exclusion and Embrace* takes questions of suffering, pain, anger, and forgiveness, and works with them not in order to produce a closed system with all the answers, but to consider and explore positions of violence, of peace, and of the nuances of living in a broken world. It is not a book that answers everything, but it is a book that opens up new questions that are of vital importance in learning to live well with

difference.⁸ Another example, particularly in the area of decolonisation and how that might shape how we live in a world scarred by that, is the work of Graham Adams, in particular his book *Holy Anarchy*, in which he asks questions about how the church can be disruptively renewing, and how that might change the faith. He does not present a definitive answer, but in asking the questions posed by approaching theology with the question, ‘What questions of our world does the Kingdom of God prompt us to ask?’⁹ he can then open up new possibilities in the affirmations we might make about the kingdom.

There are all sorts of ways into this discussion, and that is the point; a good theology is one that opens possibility, and possibility is not to be defined beforehand. And it gives us a starting point for asking what good theology looks like. Good theology is theology that helps people become what people are meant to be. The content of that answer will itself be determined theologically; but asking the question is an indispensable part of the theological task. Will the ways I am understanding God, speaking of the things of God, of faith, and of humanity, contribute to human wellbeing, or will they damage people? We saw above how Cromwell argued that bad theology would damage people, not least in their faith. By the same logic, good theology will enable people to grow in faith, in what it means to be human, and in human community.

Productive Theology: Creativity and the Image of God

This consideration of flourishing opens the door to asking whether a theology is productive, another criterion by which a theology might be judged good. A productive theology is one that moves us forward: in understanding, in faith, in service, and in the things we consider, theologically, to be good.

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996). Volf was the winner of the Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion, 2002 for this work.

⁹ Graham Adams, *Holy Anarchy: Dismantling Domination, Embodying Community, Loving Strangeness* (SCM Press, 2022).

For Christians, the God whom we worship, and therefore about whom we are attempting to speak, is God the Creator and Redeemer. A significant part of our account of this God is the claim that we are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), and that salvation is, in part, the recovering of that image, and the recognition of it in each other. We can expect, therefore, that creativity is part of who and how we are, and this must shape any attempt we make to speak about God.

By this I do not mean that we simply ‘invent’ things to say about God and call it theology. We work with our foundational texts in Scripture, and with our tradition, as the community of faith has explored over centuries what can and cannot be said while remaining faithful to both Scripture and the wider church.

That said, and as already noted, a theology that closes in on itself and that leaves no room for exploration and that treats questions and wondering as threats, is a theology drifting into dangerous territory. This brings us back to the criterion of humility: if our theology is claiming that everything that can be said has already been said, we are not approaching God with openness or with readiness to discover more of the wonder and glory that God is.

But more than humility is at stake. The question is also whether our theology leads us somewhere, or simply leaves us where we already are, confirming our convictions, supporting our power structures, and hearing our own voice. What I am calling a productive theology is one that generates further questions and opens up new possibilities.

Productivity, in this sense, is not a claim about conclusions. It is not an argument for novelty, or for the restless replacement of one doctrinal position with another simply because it is new, or even because it feels more adequate to contemporary sensibilities. A theology can be innovative in its conclusions and entirely unproductive in its method; if it simply substitutes one closed system for another, it has not moved us forward in any meaningful sense. Conversely, a theology can work with deeply traditional material and still be productive if it brings that material into genuine engagement with questions it has not previously been

asked to address, and discovers in the process something it had not seen before.

The distinction, then, is primarily one of method and attitude. A productive theology is one that treats its sources — Scripture, tradition, reason, experience — not as a closed archive to be defended, but as a living body of wisdom to be inhabited and explored. To return to the theatrical metaphor briefly mentioned above, any production of a well-known and well-loved text has a choice; it can attempt to reproduce what has gone before without exploring new meanings or new resonances, or it can, without necessarily introducing gimmicks or materially altering the text, allow the text to speak differently, with new significance and new depth because of the context and the approach. Concretely, Shakespeare's play *Henry the Fifth* had one set of resonances and connections when seen by an original audience in 1599, when a previous play with a very different approach was well known, when there was trouble in Ireland, and when there were soldiers not being paid, and another set when filmed in 1944, when the country was unsure about whether it would survive the threat from the Nazis. The script is the same, but the exploration of that script and the presentation of it work differently. Similarly, we can treat our sources with appropriate care, not changing, discounting or distorting them, but, with humility and expectation, coming to them and discovering new things, and things that open up new understanding and new ways of acting. It would have been possible, and perhaps comforting and reassuring, in 1944 to present a form of *Henry the Fifth* in ways that were fixed and 'traditional', but by choosing a new approach, new ideas and new impetus to remain faithful was found.

This framing draws on what Hans-Georg Gadamer described as the fusion of horizons; the moment in interpretation when the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader genuinely meet, and something new is understood that neither could have reached alone. Theology, on this account, is not a process of extracting fixed meanings from fixed texts, but of allowing those texts to speak into new situations, and allowing those situations to ask new questions of the texts. The tradition

is not diminished by this process; it is, in fact, the only way in which a tradition remains genuinely alive rather than becoming a museum of itself.¹⁰

We could argue, for example, that the reformers in the sixteenth century took this approach. They challenged the way in which certain resources had been used, most notably that of tradition, but they also asked new questions of existing ideas and structures, and developed new approaches and opened new possibilities as a result. Zwingli's challenge to the received understanding of the relationship between the church and the civil community took a particular shape because he was living in what was a relatively new urban environment, where previous patterns of existence were changing, with the rise of the mercantile class, and the relative independence of the city states. Within that, the emergent Anabaptists took his new approach of reading Scripture using the new humanist tools, and themselves asked new questions about the nature of the church and of the relationship between believers. The productivity of these theologies is shown in the way new things emerged as a result, both in the ways in which people understood church and themselves as church, and in the ways in which the roots of what we now call freedom of conscience and pluralistic societies began to emerge.

The emergence of liberation theology in Latin America in the late twentieth century is another. What Gustavo Gutiérrez and those who followed him did was not simply to apply existing theology to a new context. They brought the experience of the poor as a place from which God can be seen and spoken of into engagement with the tradition, and in doing so they asked questions of that tradition which it had not previously been required to answer with any seriousness. The result was not a replacement theology, but a productive expansion of what theology could see and say. Questions about the preferential option for the poor, about the structural dimensions of sin, and about whose experience counts as theologically formative did not dissolve the

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Mohr Siebeck, 1960); English translation: *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. edn (Continuum, 1989), esp. pp. 301–307 on the ‘fusion of horizons’ (Horizontverschmelzung).

tradition; they enriched and challenged it, and sent interpreters back to the sources with new eyes. They also offered new ways of conceiving of how society should function, and thus raised new possibilities of human well-being and flourishing.¹¹

Of course, we must note that, if handled carelessly, this approach becomes a self-serving one, validating whatever a theologian happens to find generative, interesting, or timely, and dismissing whatever feels settled or constraining as mere closure. This would be a serious misapplication. Productivity is not restlessness, and the generation of questions is not valuable in itself. The questions a productive theology generates must be genuine questions; ones that arise from honest engagement with the sources, with the community, and with the world rather than questions manufactured to justify a position already held.

The safeguard here is precisely the other criteria I have been exploring here. A productive theology is one that generates questions in humility, and always remains open to the possibility that the questions themselves may be wrongly posed. It generates questions in community, accountable to the wider body of the tradition and the church, rather than simply to the individual theologian's interests. And it generates questions oriented towards flourishing, that is questions that, in their very asking, serve the wellbeing of people rather than merely the advancement of an argument.

Held together, these criteria of technical rigour, rootedness in the sources, humility, accountability to the community of faith, a concern for flourishing and for the just distribution of theological voice, and this quality of productive openness begin to describe not a checklist, but an orientation. Good theology is less a set of correct conclusions than a way of standing before the mystery it is attempting to speak of: in honesty, in openness, in care for those whose lives its words will touch, and in the recognition that the God of whom it speaks is always, in the end, greater than anything it manages to say.

¹¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (SCM Press, 2005); Bonino Jose Miguez, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Fortress Press, 1976).

Another Possible World: Imagining Mission for Transformation

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Abstract

This article looks at the four gospel accounts of the resurrection experiences of Mary Magdalene and sees in them stories of imaginative responses to the challenges of transformative mission. It shows how each story offers different emphases on relating to the other. It also argues that missionaries should not seek to stay in the centre of the story but be ready to disappear from the scene when their job is done.

Keywords

Mary Magdalene; resurrection; mission; transformation

Introduction

In 2005, the World Social Forum (WSF)¹ held a meeting in Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. This was the fifth such meeting, but for the first time there was also an organised theological component or sub-group, the World Forum on Theology and Liberation, which has been gathering ever since.² As a summary aspiration for both the WSF and

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¹ On the World Social Forum, see for a brief historical overview, 'World Social Forum', Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, last updated 5 February 2026, 01:10 UTC <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum> [accessed 17 April 2026]. The movement is still continuing, and a meeting will be held in Benin in August 2026, the twentieth such meeting. For some reservations about the way it has developed, see the reflections of one of its founders, the Italian Roberto Savio, 'Farewell to the World Social Forum?', Great Transition Initiative <<https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/wsf-savio>> [accessed 8 February 2026].

² The meetings mostly take place every two years.

the World Forum on Theology and Liberation, the phrase ‘for another possible world’³ has often been used. For all its good intentions, the expression may appear rather abstract. It posits a possibility without any indication of how it might be realised.

To help root it, we can consider the Septuagint text of Isaiah 52:7. Twice it uses the word εὐαγγελιζόμενος (*euangelitsomenos*) or, as we might say in English today, ‘evangeliser’. A moment’s reflection will suggest that the emphasis on the beauty of the feet is rather odd. Normally we would expect the face to be the recipient of praise and the possessor of beauty. But concentrating on the feet suggests both a rootedness, a literal sense of being down-to-earth,⁴ and the importance of movement, of going to where people are. The willingness to get one’s feet dirty is, in this context, held in higher regard than the sound of the voice.

Moreover, these feet are also engaged in bringing a message of peace and salvation, and this in itself is good news. It is not a message of violence against the other who refuses to conform to our view of the world, but already a transformative vision, an assertion and conviction that life can be other, that, indeed, another world is possible. A transformative vision will start with engaging with the world around us, bearing to it news of peace and salvation.

³ In Portuguese, ‘*um outro mundo possível*’. There is a book which uses the English version, originating from contributions to the conference in Porto Alegre: *Another Possible World*, ed. by Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid and Ivan Petrella (SCM, 2007). A Portuguese collection from the same meeting is *Teologia para outro mundo possível* [Theology for Another Possible World], ed. by Luis Susin (Paulinas, 2006). On the World Social Forum, see also *Another World Is Possible: World Social Forum Proposals for an Alternative Globalisation*, ed. by William Fisher and Thomas Ponniah, 2nd edn (Bloomsbury, 2015). For a reflection on the first two encounters, see also Agenor Brighenti, ‘Espiritualidade para outro mundo possível: II Forum Mundial de Teologia e Libertação, Nairobi/Quênia, 16–19 de Janeiro de 2007’ [Spirituality for another possible world. Second World Forum of Theology and Liberation, Nairobi/Kenya, 16–19 January 2007] *Perspectiva Teológica*, 39 (2007), pp. 247–256.

⁴ The Brazilian theologian Clodovis Boff published, many years ago, a book of theological reflections on his pastoral work in the northern Brazilian state of Acre, entitled *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey*, trans. by Philip Berryman (Orbis, 1987). Evangelising is at least, among other things, concerned with speaking about God (theology) and also must begin with the feet on the ground that carry the evangeliser to hill tops or valleys, to deserts or to public squares.

In this article I want to reflect more on the nature of transformative mission. I will do so by attending to what seems to me a rather undervalued area in mission, namely the resurrection appearances of Jesus.⁵ Especially, I will concentrate on the different ways in which the Gospels deal with the encounter between Mary Magdalene (alone or with other women) and Jesus. I suggest that already these encounters point to a form of mission that involves engagement in being bearers of good news (evangelisers), which is truly good, and that this comes about when those entrusted with bringing the good news are able to imagine another possible world.

Although I engage with the biblical stories in what follows, I do not do so as a biblical scholar. I appreciate what biblical scholars can contribute to our understanding of the text, and I try to draw on some of their contributions in my article. But it is also true that at the heart of Christian faith and practice is the conviction that God continues to speak to us today through the Bible. So, transformative mission will also begin with a transformative listening to the words of the Scripture, and especially to what Chris Wright called its grand narrative, its story of God's mission and its call to Christians to participate in this mission.⁶

Imaginative Encounters

For the sake of clarity, it is worth stressing at the outset that when I use the word 'imagination' it is most definitely not in the sense of something untrue or fictional. Rather, to adopt a phrase of Martin Robinson, I am interested in a hermeneutic of imagination,⁷ a way of seeing the world

⁵ Of course, scholars of mission have attended to the resurrection accounts, as have biblical scholars. A notable example is Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (SPCK, 2011), who points to the missional implications here and now of belief in the resurrection. I will also return later to Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2002), especially chapter 8, 'The Women and the Resurrection: The Credibility of Their Stories', pp. 320–378.

⁶ See Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁷ Martin Robinson, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of Imagination', in *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*, ed. by Colin Greene and Martin Robinson (Authentic, 2008), pp. 206–222.

anew that allows for constructive engagement with the world, by bringing the good news that God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and that life in all its meanings can and will never be the same again. Robinson points to the importance of Christians as creative minorities, something that is of crucial importance to us in the Czech Republic, where Christians are in a small minority.⁸ But, as Robinson notes,⁹ being a minority is not necessarily bad news. There is always a tension in Christianity between the desire that everyone should believe and the clear indications in the Gospels that this is a) never going to happen and b) probably not a good idea.

Why it might not be a good idea can be understood if we consider the commands in Matthew 5:13 and 14 to be salt of the earth and light of the world, whilst remembering that in Matthew 28:18–20 the disciples are told to teach all that Jesus has commanded them. If everything was salt, food would be uneatable, and if there is no darkness, the light burning on the candle holder has no use. But without salt we would die and without light, for we do live in a world that is filled with both dark and light, the darkness would become overpowering and disabling. To be church is to be a creative, light-giving, flavour-enhancing minority. Among the imaginings that are necessary and to which Christian mission needs to contribute, several can be highlighted. What does it mean to be human in light of the encounter with the risen Christ? What does it mean to be community? What does it mean to be a community engaged as Christians in a society that is not Christian and, often for understandable reasons, rejects institutional forms of Christianity that have failed to be light and salt for the world?¹⁰

If these questions cannot be fully answered in an article, to at least attend to them and take them seriously, I will turn now to the four

⁸ The Czech Republic is often rather loosely labelled one of the most atheist countries in Europe. But as a whole raft of studies have shown, this is not the case. Nevertheless, it has a very low number (perhaps 15–20%) of the population who claim adherence to any form of religious institution. For more on this, see for example, Tim Noble, *Liberation against Entitlement: Conflicting Theologies of Grace and Clashing Populisms* (Wipf and Stock, 2022), pp. 46–48, and accompanying bibliography.

⁹ Robinson, ‘Towards a Hermeneutic of Imagination’, pp. 215–216.

¹⁰ I draw these from Robinson, ‘Towards a Hermeneutics of Imagination’, pp. 215–220, though I have slightly rephrased them and given slightly different emphases.

gospel accounts of the engagement between Jesus and Mary Magdalene after the resurrection. Most accounts of mission focus primarily on men, starting with the apostles, with Paul the last of the apostles, and then through much of the church's history with other men. But the Gospels insist that the story starts with the evangelising engagement of the women, the first bearers of the good news of the resurrection, the first to direct the other apostles (the men) towards the places of encounter with the risen Lord.¹¹ The subsequent history of mission, even in the Bible, is also full of women (in Acts and in Paul's letters especially) who are vital to the continuing mission of the church. And of course, throughout history, often shamefully neglected, women have continued to play a fundamental role in bearing the good news. Indeed, it has been suggested that Magdalene is one of Jesus's nicknames for his followers, such as Peter for Simon, or the Sons of Thunder for John and James. There is no record of a place called Magdala at the time of Jesus, so it may simply refer to the Hebrew *migdal*, or tower, seeing her as a tower of strength for the early community.¹²

In all four gospels, Mary Magdalene is named as one of those who go to the tomb of Jesus to prepare his body. In Matthew, Mark, and John it is recorded that she was also a witness to his death, and in Matthew and Mark she is among those who saw where he was laid in the tomb.¹³ Luke leaves it all more unspecific, merely recording, apparently with some embarrassment, the involvement of 'the women

¹¹ Carmen Bernabé Ubieta, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol' [Relevance of the memory of Mary Magdalene as witness and apostle], *Cuestiones Teológicas*, 41.96 (2014), pp. 279–306 (p. 285), points out that the New Testament is written from an androcentric position, so that the survival of the stories of Mary Magdalene becomes even more important and impressive.

¹² See Dorothy Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership* (Baker Academic, 2021), p. 70: 'According to Joan Taylor, however, there is no reference to "Magdala" as the name of a town in the literature of the period. It is more likely, she suggests, that "Magdalene" is a nickname given to Mary by Jesus, indicating something in her appearance or character as a "tower of strength".' The reference is to Joan Taylor, 'Missing Magdala and the Name of Mary "Magdalene"', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 146 (2014), pp. 205–223.

¹³ See Bernabé, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol', p. 287.

[...] from Galilee' (Luke 23:49 and 55).¹⁴ Despite these differences, the fact that this is one of the few events that is found, admittedly as we will see in very different ways, in all four of the gospels, suggests at the very least that it was considered of some importance by the early church communities. The accounts differ also in the groups of people involved. In Mark, Mary Magdalene is accompanied by Mary, the mother of James, and by Salome (Mark 16:1) and in Matthew by someone called 'the other Mary' (Matt 28:1). Luke begins with the generic 'women', and only specifies later that 'it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women with them' (Luke 24:10). In John, Mary Magdalene is said to have gone alone¹⁵ (John 20:1).

Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Although the four stories undoubtedly share common elements, I want to look at how they offer different ways of imagining and thus different responses to the call to mission. Let us start with the Gospel of Mark. As they head to the tomb, the women are principally preoccupied with practical matters, especially as to how they will gain access to the tomb to finish the preparation of the body. When they arrive, they see that this problem has already been solved for them. Inside the tomb they encounter 'a young man' (Mark 16:5). His first command to them is not to be amazed or alarmed (ἐκθαμβεῖσθε). Jesus, the crucified one, has been raised, he says, and he is no longer present in the tomb.

As in many other things, Mark's Gospel is the starkest and the most direct. There is no talk here of angels, but of an encounter with a strange young man dressed in a white robe. It is, let us remember, early

¹⁴ See for example, Bernabé, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol', p. 288. She points out that for Luke the primary authority is Peter, so he does not want to emphasise the role of the women more than necessary. See also on Luke's re-working and diminishing of the role of women, Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 199–200.

¹⁵ In v. 2, when reporting to Simon Peter and the other disciple, she uses the plural 'We do not know where they have laid him'. Although John may be using the synoptic tradition here and conflating his accounts, it is also true that a plural is used in his gospel to indicate what Craig Koester calls 'representative significance'. Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003), p. 68.

in the morning, in a place that is outside of the town. The presence of a young man and the absence of the body are enough to alarm anyone, and the words of this young man are not guaranteed to placate them, despite his urging them not to be alarmed. He then instructs — we could say ‘missions’ — them to go to the other disciples and Peter and tell them that Jesus ‘is going ahead of you to Galilee: there you will see him, just as he told you’ (Mark 16:7). There then follows the rather strange and abrupt ending in Mark 16:8, to which the embarrassed later community added extra verses to make it appear more fitting. The women, it tells us, were terrified, and despite the mission they received from the young man, they told no one because they were afraid.

Although there is almost universal agreement among scholars that the long ending of Mark is a later addition,¹⁶ there is still some debate as to whether Mark actually intended to end his gospel with verse 8 or whether there is somewhere a lost ending. Although it is not decisive for my argument, I am assuming that the writer of Mark’s Gospel did indeed end his work in this way.¹⁷ But why? First, it needs to be remembered that fear is also accompanied by trembling and *ekstasis*, so being afraid is not the only reaction. Nevertheless, it is odd. Whether or not they recognise the young man as an angel,¹⁸ clearly his words of reassurance do not work. The fear is understandable, but the silence is less clear. Joel Marcus, in his commentary on Mark, suggests,

Since there is no clear narrative reason for this silence, since the sentence in which it occurs seems to be redactional, and since the women’s secrecy concerns the resurrection kerygma, which Mark believes must now be proclaimed to the whole world (13:10), perhaps the explanation for the motif is to be sought on the level of the Markan community, where fear of persecution is creating a temptation to squelch the gospel message (cf. 13:9, 11–13).¹⁹

¹⁶ Among the myriad commentaries, see for example, Mark Strauss, *Mark* (HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2014), pp. 1091–1094.

¹⁷ For a good summary, see Strauss, *Mark*, pp. 1080–1084. Strauss comes down slightly in favour of v. 8 being the intended ending, for reasons that seem to me cogent.

¹⁸ On this, see Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 27A (Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 1080 and 1085.

¹⁹ Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 1087.

This then makes the comment a missional one, an implicit condemnation of the community/communities whom Mark addresses for not being more missionally active.

But it still raises the question of what the women are actually meant to do in the particular circumstances of their encounter. What are they meant to tell the disciples? And how can they fulfil the mission given them? It would be easy enough to dismiss the women as being like the men in Mark's Gospel, always getting it wrong. In her work on women in Mark, Michelle Connolly points out how for most of the second half of the gospel, the women are ignored, even if suddenly at the crucifixion, it is claimed that they had served and followed Jesus.²⁰ They are, apparently reluctantly, re-introduced at this point, because they are clearly part of the tradition related to the resurrection accounts. But the very downplaying of their role that Connolly highlights as characteristic of Mark is also a reason for their silence. Even if they speak, having been ignored and excluded for almost the whole story, why would they expect to be believed if they bring such improbable news, based at the moment only on an empty tomb and the words of a young man?

For Christians today, the resurrection comes as no surprise at all. We have heard the story so often that it runs the risk of becoming almost commonplace for us. But, of course, the whole point of the resurrection is that it is not expected, or at least the prophecies of Jesus that he would die on the cross and be raised had literally no counterpoint, nothing to which the hearers could relate so that such a statement would make sense. To understand such an event requires accepting wholeheartedly that another world is possible, that things really could be otherwise, that death is not final.

²⁰ The text in Mark is the following: 'There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem' (Mark 15:40–41). See on this Michelle Connolly, *Disorderly Women and the Order of God: An Australian Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (T&T Clark, 2018), p. 175.

Anyone who has experienced bereavement and the loss of someone close will know just how hard that is. A rational part of the brain may be able to understand, but the weight of grief and pain makes it seem that such thoughts or hopes are somehow exterior. How is it possible in these circumstances to engage a hermeneutics of imagination? They are required to proclaim, on hearsay, for they have not encountered the risen Lord themselves, that the absence of a body means that the Crucified One has now been raised. This demands a new way of seeing the world, an engagement with imagining another possible world, in which not death but life is the final word.

Moreover, to fulfil the young man's command, to carry out the mission entrusted to them, requires not just that they believe, but that their hearers are also capable of making this leap of imagination. And, to be fair to the women, the Gospel of Mark really does not offer any great hope for the disciples in this respect. They are men who 'have no faith' (cf. Mark 4:40), Peter is described as 'Satan' (Mark 8:33), they desert him when he is arrested (Mark 14:50). They do not strike the reader as filled with the imagination to believe in this new world. Richard Bauckham quotes from the second-century apocryphal work *The Epistle of the Apostles* that when two women were sent successively to tell the apostles what they had encountered, the reply to each was, 'What have we to do with you, O woman? He that is dead and buried, can he then live?'²¹ Such a reply would seem par for the course for the Markan apostles.

So, what kind of proclamation, what kind of sharing of the message is possible? The use of the word *ekstasis* in verse 8 reminds us that the women are almost literally 'besides themselves' with fear, a kind of out of body experience that reshapes one's entire perception of what is going on. And it may be most of all, the fear that what they hear is true, and all that that will entail for them in re-imagining life and the God who is at the source of all life.²²

²¹ *Ep. Ap.* 10, cited in Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, p. 327 (e-book edition).

²² For a very helpful and much fuller discussion of possible interpretations of the women's silence, see Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, pp. 341–348 (e-book edition).

It is also worth recalling that this fear is a feature of a number of the callings to mission in the Old Testament. We could mention Jeremiah, whose response to the call to prophesy is precisely concerned with an inability to speak: “Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”” (Jer 1:6). Or there is Isaiah, whose unclean lips have to be cleansed by the touch of the angel (Isa 6:7) in order for him to respond to the call of the Lord. But perhaps the best example is the comic masterpiece²³ which is the story of Jonah, where the trope that the prophet flees is taken to excess. And even when, reluctantly, Jonah does pass on the message, he finds that being heard is as bad, or at least as difficult, as not being heard. And yet, in all cases, the prophets do prophesy. But in a rather obvious way, it is clearly also true that women do too. For the existence of the Gospel of Mark depends ultimately on the transmission of the news of the resurrection. There is no other indication of any kind of appearance in the genuine Markan text, so the very fact that the gospel exists means that somehow the fear was overcome. How is perhaps a question left to the followers of the Way to determine themselves.

The lasting challenge to mission here is that, even if we are aware of the task we have been given, at least in our context we need to imagine new ways of engaging the imaginations of those among whom we live. If we simply proclaim to them the empty tomb, that God has raised Jesus the crucified one from the dead, we are of course doing mission, but are we doing it in a way that our contemporaries can hear? It is not that the transformative event of the death and resurrection of Jesus is unimaginable or that people today cannot hear and come to believe in it. They can and they do. But they need to hear it in ways that speak to them, or perhaps not so much to hear it, as to see it in action. What difference does it make to the lives of Jesus’s followers, what kind of community can they form, how do they engage in the world around them so it too may be a setting for good news? In a sense, simply to ask

²³ On the humour of Jonah, see for example, Benjamin Lazarus, *Humanist Comic Elements in Aristophanes and the Old Testament* (Gorgias, 2014), pp. 170–191. See also Juliana Claassens, ‘Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma’, *Old Testament Essays*, 28.3 (2015), pp. 655–673. As her title suggests, Claassens sees the comedy of the book as a form of resistance or resilience.

these questions may be enough, to make us sensitive to those who are afraid but who still need to go back to Galilee to follow the story through, perhaps for the first time.

It also opens up the possibility of acting not out of our strength and our power, but out of our own weakness and fear. It is possible for Christians to become too blasé about the resurrection, to take it for granted. But in doing so, its full impact and strangeness and unexpectedness is lost. There is a reason for the cyclic celebration of key Christian feasts or memories within the diachronic development of history. It is a reminder that the story is always to be experienced anew, that the transformative power of the Christian message is not a one-off, but ongoing, continually renewing and enabling life in all its diversity and richness.

Meeting Mary in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's telling is both more dramatic and more directed than that of Mark. The women are not idly wondering about how to roll back the stone but are simply overwhelmed by the presence of the angel of the Lord who makes the guards fall into a stupor. The angel greets them with the message not to fear, the same words that Jesus will use a few verses later. The message that the women receive is the same as in Mark, and this time they leave, filled both with fear (the third time fear is mentioned in this story) and joy. As they head off, they encounter Jesus and we are told that they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Jesus then repeats the message of the angel, and the women set off to pass on the message. After this, they disappear from the story.

The story is partly dependent on Mark but adds and transforms it in different ways. In Mark, the women go to anoint the body of Jesus, but Jesus has already been anointed in Matthew 26:6–13. In this text we read that 'by pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial' (26:12).²⁴ So the anointing has already taken place, and yet still the need to see is there. As Jeffrey Aernie puts it, 'In each of the scenes

²⁴ See Matthias Konradt, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. by M. Eugene Boring (Baylor University Press, 2020), p. 435.

in which Matthew explicitly identifies the women, there is an emphasis on their visual proximity to the narrated events.²⁵ To be able to respond imaginatively to mission requires having the courage to place oneself in a place where, however unexpectedly, the Lord can be encountered. The women go together, and as so often in Matthew, there are two of them (two demoniacs, two blind men, and so on).²⁶

Given that the gospel will culminate in a few verses' time with the command to go out, baptising and teaching, in order to make disciples, this pericope should also be read in terms of mission. Here the women do eventually carry out the task that is given to them, so in that sense they are successful. But they need to be encouraged to do this by Jesus. The tendency of the church community is to focus *ad intra*, which is one way of reading the references to worshipping.²⁷ In our setting, if we worship Jesus rightly (which of course is also important), then that is sometimes regarded as sufficient. People outside may be attracted by our worship, if they come to our services, but what matters is centring our life on Jesus who is present among us, wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20). Again, I repeat, this is important. Moreover, it is also a good thing to invite people to participate in our worship services. For if Christ is not present in them, we might ask why we are bothering.

But worship is even more important insofar as it sends us out to complete the task we are given. The eleven go to Galilee, so we can even assume that the mission has the desired result. But it comes about because they recognise that worship includes both gathering and dispersing — in the telling final Latin phrase of the Roman Catholic liturgy, *Ite, missa est*. This means that the mass is done and the people are to go, but of course 'missa' is also the feminine of *missus*, the one who

²⁵ Jeffrey Aernie, 'The Corporate Portrayal of Women in the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative Disciples', in *Character Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. by Craig Evan Anderson and Matthew Ryan Hauge (T&T Clark, 2024), pp. 149–162 (p. 161).

²⁶ The very title of Aernie's chapter, 'The Corporate Portrayal of Women in the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative Disciples', is indicative of this.

²⁷ It is also important to note that the clinging to his feet and the worship are also to demonstrate that Jesus is truly risen from the dead, in a bodily form that the two women have no difficulty in recognising. They are witnesses of both his death and burial and that he is risen.

is sent. The women are sent as Christians today are sent, and however small their task, it has to be carried out faithfully.

In Matthew, then, Mary Magdalene is first of all not alone. Mission begins and continues in community. Matthew and Luke both agree that Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs. Moreover, as is well known, in Matthew 10, in the end, the disciples go nowhere (cf. Matt 11:1). So, the first two disciples tasked with carrying out a specific mission of the Lord in Matthew and who actually carry out the task entrusted to them, are the two Marys, who begin the task of mission that will also be extended to the apostles and to the whole church. Their mission does not end with this, but it is the crucial part of the story, the transformation from fear to new life, from grieving death to celebrating life.²⁸

Mary of Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke

The final synoptic version of the story is in Luke. At first in this story the women are not named: they are simply those who followed to see where Jesus was lain (Luke 23:55). They are not afraid by the absence of the body, but perplexed (the Greek word is ἀπορεῖσθαι — so it was for them an *aporia*). They are however frightened by the sight not of one but two men, who almost sound like they are telling the women off: ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’ In keeping with the re-centring of geography in Luke, there is no command to say that Jesus will meet with them in Galilee. Indeed, in this case, there is no direct mission.

There are various possible explanations for this, depending on how one understands Luke and his attitude towards women,²⁹ but there is at least one obvious consequence to be drawn. Mission is, it is true, a passive word — or as has been said for the past sixty or seventy years, it is participation in the *missio Dei*. So, in this sense being sent is something that happens to us. But it happens, as the women demonstrate, not necessarily through a direct message, but as the result

²⁸ See Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, p. 336.

²⁹ See Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?*, pp. 200–202, in a chapter tellingly entitled ‘The Galilean Women: Disbelieved Witnesses’.

of a commitment to serve the Lord, made already at the beginning of Luke 8. It is participation also in a tradition, literally the handing on of what has been entrusted to us. So, simply to receive the message is to receive the invitation to convey that message to others — the feet of those who proclaim good news take them to the rest of their community, to share the good news that they have received.

This time, though, the problem is with the hearers: ‘These words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them’ (Luke 24:11). Although excuses are made for this based on interpretations of Jewish legal traditions at the time, Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, in their commentary on the gospel, argue that

the reason the men in Luke do not believe the women is not because they are Jews following a particular legal system: the reason they did not believe is because the idea of a dead person rising was incredible, unbelievable, to them.³⁰

This at least justifies the response of the women in Mark. The other disciples would indeed have found it impossible to understand what was being told to them.

Clearly this was neither the first nor the last time that men were reluctant to accept something on the say-so of women, and the apostles do not come well out of this. Only later do we hear that the Lord had appeared also to Simon (Luke 24:34), and this changed their minds. Perhaps one of the things to take from this narrative concerning mission is that, even if the good news is announced, for many it will remain an idle tale, something that is dismissed as folly, and the messenger will be dismissed. There are opposing reasons for this, to do with the nature of how the message is presented as well as with the ability of the listener to respond seriously. In Luke’s Gospel, of course, the apostles should believe and the women should be trusted. But perhaps it also needs that final shift of imagination to see how to make what is obvious to us also obvious to others.

³⁰ Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 648, and see also p. 654.

Again, this comes back to how to make the story hearable. I certainly do not want to suggest that a watered-down version of the story is offered, but it requires engaging with the imaginative capabilities of the other to learn what they are capable of hearing in order that they can attend to the telling of the story in its fullness. What is good news here and now, what is transformative, what brings life and hope, even in the midst of the most horrible suffering, such as crucifixion? Jesus appears with his wounds (Luke 24:36–40). Here they are enjoined to touch him, to engage with him at the most fundamental level. And this is what the apostles failed to do with the women. They dismissed their witness as ‘idle talk’. So, this is also a reminder that the ‘missionary’ must listen to those around, those who apparently carry less weight or importance for us in society. It is not the privileged, the good ‘church people’ who bring the news, but those who are normally ignored and excluded. Who is the bearer of good news in our context?

This leads to the recognition that the bearers of good news may not be those whom one might expect. The men, so dismissive, are those who are in positions of power in the community. They are the closest followers of Jesus, chosen by him and named by him. They have heard the words he has spoken, the promise that he would rise on the third day (Luke 9:22). But, and here again we can go back to Mark, how can this be believed? As we saw above, in the *Epistle of the Apostles*, the disciples more or less laugh in the face of the women. But it is precisely these women who have understood the message. Unlike in Mark or Matthew, they neither run in fear nor do they need the confirmation of the encounter with the risen Lord.

Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the Gospel of John

The final version of the story of the encounter of the women with Jesus is that in John’s Gospel. As already noted, Mary Magdalene goes alone. She runs to the tomb and finds the stone rolled away. This time there is no angel, no message, but, as in Luke, Mary still returns to tell the others what she has discovered. Now two men, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, run to the tomb to find out what is going on, and they too find the empty tomb. We are told that the Beloved Disciple saw and believed.

Sandra Schneiders argues that the important thing is not so much that he sees and believes, but what he sees and believes. Schneiders sees the search for an answer to the question ‘Where is the Lord?’: for the Beloved Disciple, seeing the face veil is a sign that ‘Jesus, the New Moses, has gone up the mountain to seal the New Covenant between God and the New Israel’.³¹

But this is only one answer. Not for the first time in John’s Gospel, seeing and believing is not quite enough, for following this the Beloved Disciple and Peter are described simply as returning to their homes. Meanwhile Mary remains, weeping. It is only now that the angels appear, and their only contribution is to ask why she is in tears. This odd question is of course to prepare us for the surprise that is to come. For as she turns, she sees someone, though without truly seeing him. She sees a man, whom she mistakes for the gardener.³² And she is still looking for death, for a dead body. But the text already implicitly points us to the truth of the resurrection. For she looks at where the *soma* of Jesus had lain, not his *sarx*.³³ Still, though, she needs to recognise the transformed reality of the risen Lord, to let her imagination work in order to see beyond the obvious and expected to the new. This, says Schneiders, ‘provides the second dimension of the answer to the question, “Where is the Lord?” He has returned to his own.’³⁴

It is only when Jesus speaks her name that she recognises him. Unlike in Matthew we are not told that she clings on to him, and yet Jesus responds with the famous phrase that has inspired so much art, *Noli me tangere*, do not touch me. There are many ways of understanding this. One is to see it as encouraging Mary to reimagine a world in which Jesus is alive but not present — to cling to him, to touch him, is to

³¹ Sandra Schneiders, IHM, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Liturgical Press, 2013), p. 47.

³² As Jaime Clarke-Soles notes, the article is important here. It is not any old gardener but ‘the’ (*o*) gardener, thus taking us back to Genesis. See Jaime Clarke-Soles, ‘Mary Magdalene: Beginning at the End’, in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. by Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 626–640 (p. 636).

³³ For more on this distinction, as crucial in John as it is in Paul, see Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, pp. 42–45.

³⁴ Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, p. 48.

reduce him to one form of presence only, and that is really the presence of the dead, of the corpse that she wants to anoint.³⁵ Now Jesus is living, and is set to return to the Father, and Mary is given the task of being the first proclaimer of this good news, the first witness to the fullness of the resurrection. And immediately she does as she is instructed.

This is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and beautifully human scenes in all four gospels, the sadness and tears of Mary, the gentleness of Jesus, the power of the resurrection. It is a picture of mission born out of love and inspired by love. In our setting, it can remind us that too often we can want the dead Jesus, clinging on to traditions and dreams of what things used to be. The church we want to resurrect is not the church of today, let alone of tomorrow, but something fossilised, however beautifully. Mary understands this when she hears Jesus's words, coming to truly see, and in truly seeing no longer needing to see the physical form, thus paving the way for the words which Jesus will speak to Thomas in a few verses: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe' (John 20:29).

Mary Magdalene has been described as the apostle of the apostles,³⁶ the one who sets in process the proclamation of the transformative news of the resurrection of Jesus. And yet, despite this pivotal role, after this encounter with Jesus and fulfilling the mission she has been given (John 20:18), she disappears from the New Testament story and we hear no more of her. Except of course we do, for her story remains one that is constantly told, we know her as the first and faithful witness of the resurrection, the one to stay and weep and then hear her name spoken, to receive and carry out the task of mission.

³⁵ See Clarke-Soles, 'Mary Magdalene: Beginning at the End', p. 637: 'He asks her to stop touching him not because he is ascetic, puritanical, or aloof, but because the story needs to move forward so that he can ascend to the Father who initially sent him.' Both the mission of Mary and the mission of Jesus are dynamic, both in the sense of powerful and in the sense of mobile.

³⁶ See Bernabé, 'Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol', pp. 281 and 290. The phrase, Bernabé says, is attributed to the ninth-century Frankish bishop Rabanus Maurus, though it may be even earlier.

Conclusion

In all four gospels, Mary, either alone or with others, receives the first call to bear witness to the resurrection. Spanish New Testament scholar Carmen Bernabé, a specialist in the story of Mary Magdalene, writes that ‘Mary is sent to announce the interpretation of what, in fact, has happened to Jesus, despite what appearances seems to indicate. Death has not had the last Word, nor has the political-religious system won, because God has raised him and is with him.’³⁷ She is the one capable of imagining the reality of the transformed life in Christ, and the only response to that is to share it with others, to bring them to a new way of seeing that, as the Gospel of John insists, dispenses with seeing altogether to enter into a new relationship with the risen Christ.

Ultimately, then, the encounter with the risen Lord requires a change in imagination, a new way of seeing the world as another possible world, where not death but life is the end. It requires new ways of imagining what it is to be in relation to Jesus, and in and through him with all those who follow him. It necessitates moving from sorrow to joy, being ready to proclaim the good news that the Crucified One is now also the Risen One. In our context it means searching out the living Christ among the tombs, leaving the empty spaces, returning to the places of initial encounter with life and understanding for the first time that this is where the kingdom of God is to be built.

Mary’s story is, in some ways, strangely redolent of that of the Samaritan woman in John 4. As with many other stories in John, this is a story of an encounter both with the human Jesus — the man who is tired and thirsty and desires some drink and some rest — and the risen Jesus, the one who is the Living Water. The Samaritan woman too goes on to become a witness to the presence of the Messiah: “‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’” (John 4:29) As with Mary Magdalene in Luke, she does this without any instruction or command from Jesus. But unlike in Luke, other people in the village take her seriously enough to go and see. John is slightly more circumspect. There, Mary tells the disciples

³⁷ Bernabé, ‘Relevancia de la memoria de María Magdalena como testigo y apóstol’, p. 289.

what she has heard, but in the evening, they are still unsure, the doors closed for fear of the Jews. And with the Samaritan woman, again her moment at the centre of the story does not last long. The rest of the villagers tell her, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world” (John 4:42).

This points to the last act of imaginative transformation required by the missionary. For ultimately, the task of mission is to make oneself redundant, to be, at best, a footnote in the history of the church in a particular place. It is not mission that ends, for there are always more places to go, more people to talk to, more ways and possibilities to witness to the transforming power of Christ in people’s lives. There is always the opportunity to help envision another possible world, one in which life, not death, is the final word, in which the loving presence of God is known and lived out. And yet for the individual missionary, to hear that it is no longer because of what they have said, but through people’s own personal life-changing encounter with the risen Lord that they have come to believe is the ultimate aim. There can be no greater complement to the missionary than this, and this is the story of Mary Magdalene, the first missionary of the risen Lord.

The Priesthood of All Believers and Centring Prayer: Towards a Contemplative Evangelism

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Abstract

This article argues that Centring Prayer helps mitigate the individualism often associated with the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (priesthood) by rebalancing personal devotion with the believer's call to mediate God to others. It also proposes that Centring Prayer offers a promising point of evangelistic connection with New Age practitioners in Estonia. To establish the negative effect of individualism on priesthood, this article traces the historical and biblical development of the doctrine, and critiques nineteenth- and twentieth-century shifts that overemphasised personal spirituality at the expense of community. It then introduces Centring Prayer as capable of strengthening the communal dimensions of priesthood and serving as a point of connection with New Age adherents in Estonia. To assess the viability of applying Centring Prayer evangelistically, the article proposes a four-week convergent mixed-methods study examining Centring Prayer's impact on community formation among Christians and New Age practitioners, positioning the practice as a promising model for evangelism.

Keywords

Centring Prayer/Centering Prayer; priesthood of all believers; individualism; Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary; New Age spirituality; evangelism

Introduction

This article contends that Centring Prayer¹ offers a practical corrective to the individualism that often taints the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (henceforth, priesthood) by restoring the balance between personal devotion and communal vocation, and that it has the potential to provide a strategic evangelistic bridge for engaging

¹ For clarity, a note that the British spelling of this practice is used throughout the article and indicates the equivalent 'Centering Prayer' in American usage.

those with a New Age spirituality. Priesthood teaches that every baptised believer possesses personal access to God and shares the responsibility of mediating God's presence to others. This article suggests Centring Prayer as a practical tool for overcoming the individualism often attached to priesthood by briefly tracing its development from Martin Luther to early Baptists, reviewing its biblical foundations, and locating its syncretism with individualism in the United States of America. The article then discusses the rarity of Centring Prayer among Baptists before introducing it as a means to bridge the personal and communal elements of priesthood and as an innovative outreach model, with specific reference to those drawn to New Age movements in Estonia. Through historical analysis, biblical reflection, and practical evaluation, this article seeks to illuminate the relevance of Centring Prayer for renewing the priestly vocation of all believers today.

Motivation for This Article

I have two motivations for writing this article. First, I believe Centring Prayer can help resolve the problem of individualism often attached to priesthood by increasing one's intimacy with God in a way that stirs compassion for others. Second, when I presented an earlier version of this research at the 2024 Free Church DNA conference in Tallinn, Estonia, a local seminary student mentioned the growing presence of New Age religion in the area and asked how to introduce Centring Prayer while maintaining a definite focus on Christ. I felt compelled to investigate whether this distinctly Christian form of meditation could connect the church and unbelievers in the area. I discovered that Centring Prayer had the potential to prepare believers to mediate God's presence to lonely New Age practitioners whose religion has no fellowship component.² Although the practice occurs within one's own interior space, engaging it alongside others and asking them to describe their experience can provide a sense of community while the practice

² Lea Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia: Modern Self-Understanding in a Flood of Esotericism', in *Old Religion, New Spirituality: Implications of Secularisation and Individualisation in Estonia*, ed. by Riho Altnurme (Brill, 2021), pp. 86–117 (p. 116).

itself reduces stress.³ Centring Prayer stands out as a practical prayer practice capable of mitigating individualism within the church and empowering outreach beyond its walls.

The Priesthood of All Believers Developed by Luther and Embraced by Baptists

Martin Luther developed the priesthood doctrine,⁴ and Baptists later affirmed its teaching that all Christians have personal access to God through Christ,⁵ along with the responsibility to mediate God's presence to the world.⁶ Luther formulated this doctrine to reclaim the biblical assertion that access to God belongs to all believers (Heb 4:14–16; 5:10), not just the clergy.⁷ As members of the royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), Christians share in the work of connecting others to God.⁸ Luther challenged the hierarchical structure of the medieval church, emphasising that each member of the body could approach God directly.⁹ Early Baptists affirmed the equal standing of all believers before God and weaved Luther's egalitarian view into their church structure and governance.¹⁰

Rejecting the prevailing notion that the priesthood belonged exclusively to a clerical elite,¹¹ Luther proclaimed that all Christians share equally in the royal priesthood.¹² Luther challenged the predominant medieval Catholic view that confined the priesthood to ordained

³ Jane K. Ferguson, Eleanor W. Willemsen, and MayLynn V. Castañeto, 'Centering Prayer as a Healing Response to Everyday Stress: A Psychological and Spiritual Process', *Pastoral Psychology*, 59.3 (2010), pp. 305–329.

⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*, ed. by Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor (Crossway, 2015), p. 74.

⁵ Martin Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', in *The Harvard Classics*, trans. by R. S. Grignon, The Harvard Classics, 36 (Collier & Son, 1910), pp. 1–16 (p. 14); Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Smyth & Helwys, 1993), p. 25.

⁶ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

⁷ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', pp. 13–14.

⁸ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

⁹ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

¹⁰ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, pp. 35–39.

¹¹ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 74.

¹² Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 74.

individuals with exclusive authority to administer sacraments and mediate salvation,¹³ contending instead that every baptised believer, through faith in Christ, shares in the priestly vocation.¹⁴ The German reformer promoted the equality of believers, as he explained that all Christians belonged to the same estate, with the only difference being that of office or specific duties.¹⁵ No need existed for a special class of priest as Christ provided every believer with access to God¹⁶ and the duty of mediating the divine presence to others through loving service.¹⁷

Luther's understanding of Christ's dual office as both king and priest reinforced his conviction that all Christians participate in Christ's mediating work. Luther interpreted Christ's mediatorial role as encompassing royal and priestly intercession, wherein kings govern and priests offer sacrifices and prayers.¹⁸ By making Christ's cross central to his reading of Scripture, Luther emphasised that Christ fulfilled his priestly office by offering himself in sacrifice and interceding even for his adversaries.¹⁹ Christ enlists believers into the 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:9) and tasks them with the vocation of mediating his presence to the

¹³ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, pp. 74, 35. The medieval Catholic Church regarded sin as a weakness of people who needed to be strengthened by the sacraments.

¹⁴ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 74.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, 'Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate', letter, Wittenburg, Germany, 1520, Stanford University <<https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Luther-ChristianNobility.pdf>> [accessed 3 April 2026], pp. 1–7 (p. 1).

¹⁶ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14. Luther does not use the language of 'direct access to God' but states that faith 'unites the soul to Christ, as the wife to the husband', and such intimate unity connotes and intensifies access.

¹⁷ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

¹⁸ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 72; Martin Luther, 'On the Freedom of a Christian', 1520, Internet History Sourcebooks Project, Fordham University <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/Luther-freedomchristian.asp>> [accessed 14 April 2026]; Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 14–16. See also Gasparo Contarini and Hubert Jedin, 'Contarini und Camaldoli', in *Archivio per la storia della piet * (Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1959), II, pp. 51–117. Confusion existed within the church as seen in the account of an unnamed priest who eased Gasparo Contarini's anxious conscience in 1511 by telling him that Christ atoned for all humanity's sins — a sharp divergence from the view held by Contarini's friends who joined a hermitage in Arezzo, thinking monasticism was the only way to certain salvation.

¹⁹ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 72.

world.²⁰ The conviction that all Christians share in both the privilege of accessing God and the responsibility of divine mediation influenced the Baptist understanding of priesthood.

The Lutheran concept of the general priesthood²¹ shaped early Baptist theology, particularly its repudiation of the idea that only a clerical elite could access and mediate God's presence.²² Baptists adopted this view of priesthood about a hundred years after Luther's critique of the medieval church, claiming that the individual 'comes before God personally, directly, and voluntarily'.²³ In 1610, John Smyth, an early Baptist minister and former Anglican priest,²⁴ embraced the agency of all people to approach God on their own and likewise to resist salvation altogether.²⁵ Around the same time, Thomas Helwys authored a confession with similar statements, underscoring the individual's responsibility to choose eternal life or death,²⁶ and thus, along with Smyth, democratising the prevailing medieval notion of priesthood.

The voluntary membership and congregational autonomy that define Baptist church structure reflect Luther's emphasis on the believer's unmediated access to God within the Free Church tradition.²⁷ Walter Shurden underscored the freedom of local churches when he stated that Baptists historically affirm the independence of the local church to 'determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, [and] to ordain who they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female'.²⁸ In Baptist practice, church membership is

²⁰ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 73; Martin Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian', trans. by W. A. Lambert, rev. by Harold J. Grimm, in *Luther's Works, Volume 31: The Career of the Reformer I*, ed. by Harold J. Grimm (Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31, p. 354. Luther believed that Christ fulfilled the sacrificial function of priesthood and negated the need for its continuance.

²¹ Luther, 'Open Letter to the Christian Nobility', p. 2.

²² Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 25.

²³ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 25.

²⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2: The Reformation to the Present Day* (HarperOne, 2010), p. 195.

²⁵ John Smyth, 'Corde Credimus', cited in William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Mercer University Press, 2004), p. 16.

²⁶ Thomas Helwys, 'Synopsis Fidei', cited in Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*, p. 17.

²⁷ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, pp. 35–39.

²⁸ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 33.

voluntary and based on the belief that following Christ remains a personal decision, and that the church ought to consist solely of those who have made that commitment.²⁹ When a church comprises itself of people with direct access to God, the Baptist conviction is that God is in its midst and that the church has the duty and right for full autonomy in running itself under the headship of Christ.³⁰

Biblical Foundations for the Priesthood of All Believers

A biblical overview of priesthood supports Luther's claim that all believers have personal access to God and the duty of mediating God's presence to others. Three biblical tenets affirm priesthood: God authored the priesthood role and chose his people to embody it;³¹ Old Testament priests modelled Israel's collective priestly role;³² and Christ extended this calling to his followers, commissioning them to mediate his presence to the world.³³

The identity of the ancient Hebrews as a kingdom of priests came solely from God's efforts and design. From the beginning, God established the Garden of Eden as a prototypical temple³⁴ and entrusted Adam with priestly duties to 'cultivate and keep' it (Gen 2:15). When paired, these two Hebrew terms characterise Israel's service to God and the liturgical duties of the Levitical priesthood within the tabernacle (Num 3:7–8, 8:25–26, 18:5–6; 1 Chron 23:32; Ezek 44:14).³⁵ Later in the Pentateuch, God emphasises his role in preserving the Hebrew people as he confers onto them their priestly identity, reminding his children

²⁹ T. Furman Hewitt, 'The Church', in *A Baptist's Theology*, ed. by Wayne R. Stacy (Smyth & Helwys, 1999), pp. 113–132 (p. 119); Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 36.

³⁰ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 117; Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 36.

³¹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 30.

³² Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 32.

³³ Simon Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers: Clericalism and How to Avoid It* (SCM Press, 2022), pp. 36, 38; Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, 34A (Doubleday, 1974), p. 479.

³⁴ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblica Theology, 17 (IVP Academic, 2004), pp. 66–80; Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 28.

³⁵ Beale and Carson, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, pp. 66–67.

that he saved them from Pharaoh's military (Exod 14), sustained them (Exod 15:22–27; 16:1–21; 17:1–7), and secured victory for them over Amalek (Exod 17:8–16).³⁶ Yahweh stresses his role as the architect of the Hebrews' protection and provision with three 'I' statements: 'what *I* did to Egypt', '*I* carried you on eagles' wings', and '*[I]* brought you to myself' (Exod 19:4).³⁷ God then explained that when the people obeyed him, he would make them a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:5–6) — a designation authored and upheld by God's own self.³⁸

Rather than calling the people to self-isolate from the rest of the Ancient Near Eastern world, God designated Israel as a priestly people who were to mediate God's presence to the nations. Old Testament priests mediated between Yahweh and the general population,³⁹ while serving as a 'model for Israel's self-understanding of its role among the nations'.⁴⁰ Individuals therefore not only shared the responsibility for maintaining the collective holiness of the people but also shared the responsibility for attending to the holiness of the nations.⁴¹ William Johnstone takes Israel's priestly identity to mean that God set Abraham's descendants apart to the exclusion of the other nations.⁴² Yahweh had a broader view in mind, however, as he always desired his people to mediate his presence to Gentiles (Exod 19:5–6). Even as far back as Genesis, God sought to bless all nations through Abraham's family (Gen 12:3). God did not set apart a priestly kingdom to insulate them from the world, but for that priestly kingdom to extend divine access to foreigners.⁴³

³⁶ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 30.

³⁷ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 30.

³⁸ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 31; Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, p. 37; John Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19.6*, *Journal for the Study of the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 395, ed. by Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein (Continuum, 2004), pp. 70–86.

³⁹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 104.

⁴¹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 36–37.

⁴² William Johnstone, *Exodus 1–19* (Smyth & Helwys, 2014), p. 400.

⁴³ Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, pp. 37–38.

New Testament believers pushed past the barriers of ethnic exceptionalism as its members became mediators of God's presence to those inside and outside the church. Jesus's sacrifice tore the veil that had limited divine connection to the Most Holy Place⁴⁴ and blocked access to all but the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Exod 26:31–33).⁴⁵ The torn veil opened access to God for all who believed (Luke 23:44–47)⁴⁶ and God's Spirit filled the first believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:4). They immediately shared God's message with the Jewish sojourners gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:6), provided for each other's needs (Acts 2:44–45), prayed together (Acts 4:23–31), and encouraged one another (Acts 11:23, 15:32). The church spread beyond geographic boundaries, connecting people to God from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–38), the Roman military (Acts 10), Europe (Acts 16–18), Asia (Acts 13–21), and Africa (Acts 8:26–39).

American Individualism in Priesthood: A Caution for Global Christians

Modern scholarship lacks an explicit connection to the rise of individualism among European Free Church communities, while its presence among American Baptists has been well documented.⁴⁷ Isolated events point to the rise of individualism in European churches, such as the Northern European nonconformist revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that stressed personal revival,⁴⁸ but nowhere do scholars explicitly demonstrate the connection between these revivals and the prevalence of individualism among Free Church

⁴⁴ Note that the inflection of εἰρησθῆναι 'was torn' indicates a divine passive.

⁴⁵ David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 2011), pp. 927–928. Garland observes that two curtains hung in the temple separated by a cubit of space, and Scripture identifies the torn curtain as the second one that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (Heb 9:3).

⁴⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 1996), pp. 603–604.

⁴⁷ Winthrop Still Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Judson Press, 1979), p. 142.

⁴⁸ Martin Åberg, 'Liberalism and Revivalism: A Comparative Case Study of Liberal Ideology, Individualism, and Revivalism in Schleswig-Holstein and Värmland, ca. 1860–1920', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 38.2 (2013), pp. 154–179.

congregations. This section acknowledges the presence of individualism in European Christianity, but treats its simultaneous increase in the United States as a warning for global believers given the robust body of scholarship concerning the trend toward personal autonomy among American Baptists.

The priesthood doctrine shifted over time from its original emphasis on shared spiritual responsibility to a more individualistic interpretation shaped by cultural and societal influences.⁴⁹ Particularly in the context of American religious thought, forces such as the Enlightenment's view of the autonomous self and modern individualism distorted this doctrine.⁵⁰ In the twentieth century, E. Y. Mullins advanced the concept of 'soul competency' to affirm personal responsibility before God;⁵¹ later scholars interpreted his ideas in individualistic ways that often neglected the communal dimensions of Christian life.⁵² This section demonstrates how a hyper-personalised theology gradually eclipsed the original personal–communal balance of priesthood, critiques Mullins's theology, and uses the ongoing struggle of individualism in the United States as a word of caution for the global church.

Although priesthood originally emphasised equal access to God and mutual ministry,⁵³ American individualism in the 1900s partly reshaped it into a hyper-personalised faith that diminished the role of Christian community.⁵⁴ Luther posited the concept of priesthood to democratise the clericalism of the medieval church and guide Christians

⁴⁹ Dale R. South, 'Saved for God's Possession: Recovering the Gospel Among Southern Baptists by Guarding Against Its Syncretization with Autonomous Individualism' (doctoral dissertation, North Carolina, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), pp. 130–140. South traces the development of American individualism (pp. 130–139) while noting that such thinking became pervasive from the 1960s to the 1980s.

⁵⁰ Dan R. Stiver, 'A Word About ... Reframing Soul Competency in Terms of the "Capable Self" in Nussbaum, Sen, and Ricoeur', *Review & Expositor*, 114.2 (2017), pp. 146–154 (pp. 146–147).

⁵¹ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, ed. by C. Douglas Weaver (Mercer University Press, 2010), p. 68.

⁵² Stiver, 'Reframing Soul Competency', pp. 146–147.

⁵³ Findley B. Edge, 'Priesthood of Believers', *Review & Expositor*, 60.1 (1963), pp. 9–21 (pp. 9, 10).

⁵⁴ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

to a more egalitarian view of baptised believers.⁵⁵ Mullins defined his concept of ‘soul competency’ as the understanding that a person remains competent to ‘deal alone with God’,⁵⁶ and proposed this as a basis for Baptist polity.⁵⁷ William McNutt further individualised ‘soul competency’ by stating that a person did not need the church for grace or salvation, since ‘the individual is competent in all matters of religion’.⁵⁸ This perspective on priesthood effectively made ‘every man’s hat his own church’,⁵⁹ undermining the biblical principles of community and church discipline. While Christian tradition has always been shaped in some way by societal norms, I would contend that such a radical notion of priesthood and ‘soul competency’ tended to rely too heavily on nineteenth-century culture and not enough on biblical study.⁶⁰

Late twentieth-century scholars often criticised Mullins’s doctrine of ‘soul competency’ as excessively individualistic,⁶¹ yet such assessments lack nuance by neglecting the historical and theological context in which he wrote.⁶² The notion that Mullins became too individualistic grew as scholars considered concepts that Mullins did not write about, such as the types of community and spiritual formation necessary for believers to thrive.⁶³ Mullins likely neglected to explain such matters because they stood as part of the Baptist consensus of his day,⁶⁴ and without direct access to what comprised that consensus, there

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, ‘Open Letter to the Christian Nobility’, pp. 2–3; Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 81–83. Anizor and Voss state that Luther promoted the priesthood doctrine in order to make Scripture available to the laity and not solely to Roman Catholic clergy, since he believed that limiting access to God’s Word diminished its ability to empower the church. Printing Bibles in the vernacular in the 16th century was revolutionary and remains one of Luther’s enduring contributions.

⁵⁶ Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, p. 68; David M. Stratton, ‘E. Y. Mullins’ Neglected Theological Foundation for Church-State Separation’, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 47.2 (2012), pp. 82–91 (p. 84).

⁵⁷ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

⁵⁸ William Roy McNutt, *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Judson Press, 1959), pp. 21–24.

⁵⁹ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

⁶⁰ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

⁶¹ Dan R. Stiver, ‘Reframing Soul Competency’, pp. 146–147.

⁶² Russell D. Moore and Gregory A. Thornbury, ‘The Mystery of Mullins in Contemporary Southern Baptist Historiography’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3 (1999), pp. 44–57 (p. 45).

⁶³ Curtis W. Freeman, ‘E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity’, *Review & Expositor*, 96.1 (1999), pp. 23–42 (p. 34).

⁶⁴ Freeman, ‘E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity’, p. 34.

is a danger for contemporary theologians to fill in the gaps with revisionist assumptions that may not reflect Mullins's line of reasoning.⁶⁵ Mullins passed away in 1928, the same year that McNutt published his treatise on soul competency and Baptist polity. Consequently, Mullins never had the opportunity to respond to McNutt's more radical views.⁶⁶

The individualisation of priesthood that prioritises personal spirituality over communal faith persists mostly in American churches and constitutes a grave warning for the Western church as a whole.⁶⁷ In 2005, George Barna reported on the trend among North American Christians to discontinue their church attendance.⁶⁸ He stated that a significant portion of devout Christ-followers found ways to cultivate their connections to God outside the community of local churches.⁶⁹ Barna's research was conducted with individuals who saw church as expressing their commitment to converse about God while engaged in a hobby with like-minded people.⁷⁰ In 2015, Grace Davie cited a trend among British congregations that affirmed many tenets of New Age teachings, including an emphasis on a personal rather than transcendent deity as they look to 'the God within' themselves.⁷¹ The extreme individualism in churches in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Britain, serves as a cautionary note for all Western Christians.

Centring Prayer as a Relatively Rare Practice Among Baptists

Although some Christian traditions have shown interest in Centring Prayer,⁷² it remains uncommon within the Baptist world. Centring Prayer emphasises interior stillness and nonverbal communion with

⁶⁵ Moore and Thornbury, 'The Mystery of Mullins', p. 45. Moore and Thornbury state, 'One thing is clear: everyone sees their own image in the mirror when they study E.Y. Mullins.'

⁶⁶ Freeman, 'E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity', p. 30.

⁶⁷ George Barna, *Revolution* (Tyndale Momentum, 2005), pp. 8, 131.

⁶⁸ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 105; Barna, *Revolution*, pp. 8, 131.

⁶⁹ Barna, *Revolution*, pp. 8, 131.

⁷⁰ Barna, *Revolution*, p. 3.

⁷¹ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 159.

⁷² 'Cynthia Bourgeault', Cynthia Bourgeault, n.d. <<https://www.cynthiabourgeault.org/>> [accessed 27 June 2025]; Ryan Dunn, 'Centering Prayer and Meditation', The United Methodist Church, n.d. <<https://www.umc.org/en/content/centering-prayer-and-meditation>> [accessed 27 June 2025].

God, which contrasts with the intercession historically embraced by Baptist churches.⁷³ The discussion here explores Baptists' rich history with corporate intercession, the unfamiliarity with wordless prayer, the emphasis on biblically explicit petitions, and misconceptions about mind emptying as some of the reasons Centring Prayer does not exist in the mainstream of Baptist practice.

Centring Prayer is a contemplative and wordless prayer practice in which the practitioner seeks unpressured time in God's presence. The image of a recently fed, perfectly content infant resting in its mother's arms (Ps 131:2) expresses the goal of this form of prayer. The believer comes to God without pressure to articulate words, thoughts, or hear from God, but to simply *be* with God in love. This practice works best when done in conjunction with other prayer practices or devotional Scripture reading.

Baptists have a rich history of audible corporate prayer, tied to mission and renewal. Prayer meetings have been central to the way Baptists have experienced God advancing his kingdom.⁷⁴ Jonathan Edwards noted the usefulness of corporate prayer for spiritual awakening that reaches commoners and national leaders alike,⁷⁵ inspiring William Carey and John Sutclif to hold prayer meetings to support their ministries.⁷⁶ Sutclif's prayer gatherings motivated the prayer groups that fuelled the eighteenth-century Welsh revivals⁷⁷ and led tens of thousands to Christ throughout Britain.⁷⁸

Despite the potential of Centring Prayer for individual and collective fruit, it remains virtually untouched by Baptist practice due to

⁷³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Baker Books, 1998), p. 223.

⁷⁴ Jamie Dunlop, 'Class IV: Corporate Prayer', Blog, *IX: 9Marks*, 2010 <<https://www.9marks.org/article/class-iv-corporate-prayer/>> [accessed 27 June 2025].

⁷⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *A Call to United, Extraordinary Prayer: An Humble Attempt* (Christian Focus, 2003), pp. 16–17.

⁷⁶ Joel R. Beeke, 'The History of Prayer Meetings', Christian Library, 2004 <<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/history-prayer-meetings#endnote-content-13>> [accessed 27 June 2025].

⁷⁷ Beeke, 'Prayer Meetings'.

⁷⁸ Erroll Hulse, *Give Him No Rest: A Call to Prayer for Revival* (Evangelical Press, 1991), pp. 78–79.

their communal understanding of intercession as an outworking of priesthood.⁷⁹ Likewise, misunderstandings about Centring Prayer occur within a framework of evangelical prayer practices that draw from clear biblical models of intercession involving words,⁸⁰ where Free Church theologians sometimes express concern that wordless prayer necessitates mental emptying.⁸¹ The confusion over Centring Prayer remains understandable, as most forms of meditation attempt to experience the mind without thoughts,⁸² and Christian meditation has sought to move away from that by pursuing deeper meaning from Scripture based on inquiry.⁸³ While Centring Prayer may look like meditation from other religions, it departs from them by placing the focus on being with God and connecting to God beyond the limits of human knowledge.⁸⁴ Those who engage in Centring Prayer do not seek a mental void, but a total concentration on God's presence, heightening their intimacy with the divine.⁸⁵ Rather than emptying the mind, Centring Prayer aims to deepen the practitioner's awareness *of* and union *with* God,⁸⁶ reorienting attention toward a divine encounter that transcends verbal articulation.⁸⁷

Centring Prayer Strengthens the Communal Nature of Priesthood

Although Centring Prayer begins from a position that differs from the communal understanding of priesthood, this solitary practice produces effects that extend outward beyond the individual. The communal benefits of this prayer occur as it strengthens the connection between

⁷⁹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 128–130.

⁸⁰ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 128–130.

⁸¹ Peter DeHaan, 'The Dangers of Centering Prayer', Peter DeHaan, Pursuing Biblical Christianity, 7 November 2021 <<https://www.peterdehaan.com/christianity/centering-prayer/>> [accessed 26 June 2025].

⁸² Kevin Sharpe, *Centering Prayer: Healing Our God Wound* (Imagine That!, 2024), p. 22.

⁸³ Sharpe, *Centering Prayer*, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Sharpe, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 24–25.

⁸⁵ Lukas Vischer, *Intercession* (World Council of Churches, 1980), pp. 25–27, 48–49.

⁸⁶ Anonymous, *The Book of Privy Counseling in The Cloud of Unknowing: And The Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. by William Johnston (Image, 2014), pp. 137–138.

⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, ed. by Sarah Coakley (Liturgical Press, 2018), p. 101; David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God* (Sounds True, 2017), pp. 56–57.

the personal piety and communal responsibility that is intrinsic to a healthy view of priesthood. Centring Prayer combines the private practices of solitude and silence in a way that allows God's presence to heal the heart, so the person returns to their community as a calm presence.⁸⁸ Considering the pervasiveness of social isolation,⁸⁹ and Western society's openness to meditation,⁹⁰ Centring Prayer's ability to mitigate loneliness⁹¹ makes it a useful outreach tool. In this section, I demonstrate Centring Prayer's communal benefits by setting out the steps involved in Centring Prayer, the way it benefits the community, and how its mitigation of loneliness makes it a timely evangelism resource.

The five-step Centring Prayer method recommended here is adapted from David Frenette's four-step model that readily accommodates modern schedules.⁹² First, the practitioner chooses a comfortable setting free of distractions,⁹³ sitting in a chair with their back straight, shoulders relaxed, and feet flat on the ground.⁹⁴ Second, the practitioner chooses a short prayer word that symbolises their consent to the presence of God within them and reminds them of this presence.⁹⁵ Third, the individual gently closes their eyes, takes a few deep

⁸⁸ Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form* (Image, 2010), pp. 122–127; Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Image, 1986), pp. 41–42.

⁸⁹ Vivek Murthy, 'Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community', Advisory (Washington, DC: Office of the US Surgeon General, 2023), pp. 12–15; Dennis Thompson, 'Loneliness Is Plaguing Americans in 2024: Poll', *U.S. News*, 2024 <<https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2024-02-01/loneliness-is-plaguing-americans-in-2024-poll>> [accessed 7 April 2026].

⁹⁰ Ashley Ross, 'How Meditation Went Mainstream', *Time*, 2016 <<https://time.com/4246928/meditation-history-buddhism/>> [accessed 29 July 2024].

⁹¹ Nicholas DiMauro, 'Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer: A Mixed Methods Study', *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 44.44 (2024), pp. 1–16.

⁹² DiMauro, 'Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer', p. 5; Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, p. 6.

⁹³ Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, p. 62.

⁹⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice*, (Shambhala Publications, 2016), p. 23.

⁹⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing: And The Book of Privy Counseling*, p. 84; Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, p. xxlii.

breaths, and calmly introduces their prayer word silently to God.⁹⁶ Fourth, whenever distractions arise as sensations or thoughts, the practitioner gently returns to their prayer word to softly refocus their awareness on God's presence.⁹⁷ Fifth, the practitioner keeps their eyes silently shut for a moment before gently reopening them and returning to their daily routine by praying a psalm out loud.⁹⁸

Centring Prayer balances the individual and communal aspects of priesthood by helping the believer interact with their community as a calm presence,⁹⁹ as it helps to change the way individuals relate to their thoughts.¹⁰⁰ The individual practitioner experiences formation in centring prayer as they learn to create space between themselves and their thoughts, training the practitioner to focus on God rather than negative cognitions.¹⁰¹ This contemplative prayer style teaches one to hold less emotional distress by finding contentment in God,¹⁰² and decreases the anxiety of the community when the individual practitioner remains consistently calm.¹⁰³ Centring Prayer fosters communal wellness through individual renewal.

Any discussion of the mental health benefits associated with Centring Prayer merits an acknowledgment of the nature and limitations of the cited research. While this article reports findings from empirical studies that have been conducted on Centring Prayer, any accounts of its potential therapeutic effects, such as mitigated anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation, reflect outcomes within those specific research contexts. It is important not to interpret these findings as guarantees of similar results for all practitioners, as the experiences of even a single practitioner often vary.

⁹⁶ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, pp. 25–26.

⁹⁷ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), p. 32.

⁹⁸ Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 58–59.

⁹⁹ Joshua J. Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression Relapse Prevention', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51.3 (2012), pp. 908–24 (p. 921).

¹⁰⁰ Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', p. 919.

¹⁰¹ Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', p. 919.

¹⁰² Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 42.

¹⁰³ R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 38–39, 54.

The Priesthood doctrine serves as a foundation for the outreach that Centring Prayer has the potential to activate due to its likely capacity for mitigating the universal experience of loneliness.¹⁰⁴ In this way, Centring Prayer promises to serve both the Christian community and offer an avenue for outreach in terms of mitigated loneliness.¹⁰⁵ In 2024, Ieva Reine and colleagues found that loneliness increased with age among senior citizens in Nordic-Baltic countries, noting that 40% of older adults aged 75 and above experienced loneliness compared to 28% of those aged 64–75.¹⁰⁶ Anja Langness and Leander Berner found that 57% of young adults in the European Union aged 18–35 felt lonely compared to 47% of people aged 36–69.¹⁰⁷ Taken together, these findings indicate that loneliness affects all adult age groups. Joshua Knabb, Kirk A. Johnson, and Nicholas DiMauro conducted separate studies that found Centring Prayer effective in mitigating loneliness among believers,¹⁰⁸ while David Frenette demonstrated its potential for outreach by noting that practitioners need not identify as Christians if they can reflect on ‘who God is for [them]’¹⁰⁹ before centring.

A key finding from the various research is that Centring Prayer prepares isolated individuals to reintegrate into a community. Increasing social contact does not necessarily negate loneliness, as people accustomed to isolation perceive threats quicker, experience greater

¹⁰⁴ Edge, ‘Priesthood of Believers’, pp. 15–16; DiMauro, ‘Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer’, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰⁵ DiMauro, ‘Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer’, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰⁶ Ieva Reine, Madara Mikelsona, Signe Tomosone, Helgi Guðmundsson, Andrejs Ivanovs, Halldór S. Guðmundsson, and Ilze Koroleva, ‘Unraveling the Dynamics of Loneliness in the Baltic-Nordic Region: A Comparative Analysis in the Wake of COVID-19’, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12 (April 2024), pp. 1–12 (pp. 1–2, 4). Reine et al. found employment status a significant influence on individuals’ experience of loneliness, where regular work decreased the likelihood of felt isolation.

¹⁰⁷ Anja Langness and Leander Berner, ‘A Comparison of Youth Loneliness in Europe in 2024’, Bertelsmann Stiftung, n.d. <<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/next-generation-and-society/project-news/a-comparison-of-youth-loneliness-in-europe-in-2024>> [accessed 12 March 2025].

¹⁰⁸ Kirk A. Johnson, ‘Prayer: A Helpful Aid in Recovery from Depression’, *Journal of Religion & Health*, 57.6 (2018), pp. 2290–2300 (p. 2293); Knabb, ‘Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT’, pp. 918–919; DiMauro, ‘Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer’, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰⁹ Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, p. 65.

anxiety, grow suspicious of others, and become predisposed to taking offence at another person's words or actions.¹¹⁰ Fostering intrapersonal coping mechanisms decreases the negative inner effects of isolation.¹¹¹ Intrapersonal coping resources refer to positive elements in one's setting that are not directly related to relationships with other people.¹¹² Centring Prayer bolsters three intrapersonal resources: a healthy perception of self;¹¹³ satisfaction with one's walk with God;¹¹⁴ and reduced self-criticism,¹¹⁵ as the practice decreases negative thought patterns and prepares one to interact more positively with others. Cynthia Bourgeault describes the inner change that poises one to reintegrate into a community after establishing a Centring Prayer practice:

The place to look for results is in what happens after you get up from your meditation cushion. As that gentle releasing motion you've practiced in centering prayer gradually works its way into your system, most people will typically begin to notice a greater spaciousness and flexibility in their daily life, and along with this an improvement in their personal relationships.¹¹⁶

The increased spaciousness Bourgeault observes indicates a rise in contentment that makes meaningful connections more plausible.

Centring Prayer as an Outreach Model to New Age Adherents

Building on the preceding discussion of the way Centring Prayer bridges the personal and communal dimensions of priesthood, and the potential of the practice to address broader social and spiritual challenges such as

¹¹⁰ Stephanie Cacioppo, Munirah Bangee, Stephen Balogh, Carlos Cardenas-Iniguez, Pamela Qualter, and John T. Cacioppo, 'Loneliness and Implicit Attention to Social Threat: A High-Performance Electrical Neuroimaging Study', *Cognitive Neuroscience*, 7.1–4 (2016), pp. 138–159 (p. 139).

¹¹¹ Mark R. McMinn, R. Allen Lish, Pamela D. Trice, Alicia M. Root, Nicole Gilbert, and Adelene, Yap, 'Care for Pastors: Learning from Clergy and Their Spouses', *Pastoral Psychology*, 53.6 (2005), pp. 563–81 (p. 565).

¹¹² McMinn et al., 'Care for Pastors', p. 565.

¹¹³ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, p. 39.

¹¹⁵ Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', p. 921. Knabb explains how centring prayer bypasses 'verbal activity that reestablishes negative thinking patterns'.

¹¹⁶ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, p. 36.

the epidemic of loneliness, this section offers a proposal for further exploration of the way the practice might contribute to the search for meaning in increasingly secular or spiritually eclectic contexts. As societies witness a growing openness to spiritual practices¹¹⁷ alongside a decline in traditional religious affiliation,¹¹⁸ Centring Prayer may offer a unique point of connection between Christians and individuals identifying with the New Age movement, thereby extending divine access to unbelievers in a way commensurate with God's longtime purpose for his people (Gen 12:3). The following proposal outlines a study designed to investigate the potential of Centring Prayer as a shared spiritual practice capable of fostering relational depth, reducing loneliness, and cultivating fellowship across diverse belief systems.

The discussion exploring the way Centring Prayer joins priesthood's individual and corporate dimensions prompts an important and unresolved question: Given the global rise in loneliness,¹¹⁹ current openness to spiritual practices,¹²⁰ and research indicating a link between reduced loneliness and Centring Prayer,¹²¹ how might the consistent practise of Centring Prayer benefit isolated individuals within the New Age movement?¹²² In places like Estonia, where the number of New Spirituality adherents has nearly equalised that of self-proclaimed Christians,¹²³ Centring Prayer may offer communal connection in a low-pressure environment, as both Christians and New Age followers

¹¹⁷ Marko Uibu, 'The Spiritual Milieu in Estonia: Challenges and Opportunities for Studying Contemporary Forms of Religion', in *Old Religion, New Spirituality: Implications of Secularisation and Individualisation in Estonia*, ed. by Riho Altnurme (Brill, 2021), pp. 118–130 (p. 121). Uibu's interviews with Estonians from 2011–2015 demonstrated an openness to spiritual practices.

¹¹⁸ Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia', pp. 115–117.

¹¹⁹ GilPress, 'Loneliness Statistics Worldwide 2024', What's The Big Data, 13 May 2024 <<https://whatsthebigdata.com/loneliness-statistics/>> [accessed 7 August 2024]; Reine et al., 'Unraveling the Dynamics of Loneliness in the Baltic-Nordic Region', pp. 1–2, 4; Langness and Berner, 'A Comparison of Youth Loneliness in Europe in 2024'.

¹²⁰ Uibu, 'The Spiritual Milieu in Estonia', p. 121.

¹²¹ DiMauro, 'Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer', pp. 7–9; Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', pp. 918–919.

¹²² Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia', p. 116. Altnurme indicates that, particularly in Estonia, New Age adherents lack understanding of the communal aspect of spirituality, not recognising that 'self-spirituality is collective'. This manner of isolation on a spiritual level may create a need for community that the church can fill.

¹²³ Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia', pp. 115–116.

discuss their experiences with the practice. I suggest a study investigating this should seek to answer two questions:

- What change does Centring Prayer have, if any, on the experience of loneliness among New Age people?
- In what ways do New Age practitioners benefit from small, weekly Centring Prayer gatherings?

To address these questions, I propose a four-week convergent mixed-methods study to evenly integrate quantitative and qualitative data on the practice of Centring Prayer among Christian and New Age practitioners in Estonia's secular context.¹²⁴ In terms of approach, I recommend subjects engage in 15-minute sessions three times a week — twice individually, and once as a group. I suggest a pre-test and post-test survey to assess changes in perceived loneliness,¹²⁵ while study members maintain reflective journals to document their experiences after each session. Ideally, each group would consist of an equal number of Christians and New Age adherents, would meet in person,¹²⁶ affirm a shared belief in an accessible, transcendent divine presence, and be guided by a facilitator who cultivates a space of benevolent listening and mutual respect.¹²⁷ Such a study may reveal Centring Prayer as a subtle outreach approach that circumvents the kind of argumentation that unbelievers tend to resist.

¹²⁴ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage, 2018), p. 15.

¹²⁵ Daniel W. Russell, 'UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, Validity, and Factor Structure', *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 66.1 (1996), pp. 20–40 (p. 23). I recommend the third version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale since it remains conducive to balanced results.

¹²⁶ Jonathan Gruber, Eszter Hargittai, and Minh Hao Nguyen, 'The Value of Face-to-Face Communication in the Digital World: What People Miss about in-Person Interactions When Those Are Limited', *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 22.3 (2022), pp. 417–435 (p. 424).

¹²⁷ Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, p. 165. Pennington's treatment of Centring Prayer keeps me optimistic about the efficacy of a centring practice among New Age practitioners, not least due to his account of teaching the practice to a Hindu monk who declared it 'the most beautiful experience I have ever had'.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Centring Prayer offers an accessible means for countering the individualism that has shaped modern interpretations of priesthood by reuniting its personal and communal dimensions and returning to the heart of the doctrine developed by Martin Luther and embraced by early Baptists. This practice also carries the potential to serve as an evangelistic link between the church and New Age practitioners in secular contexts like Estonia, thereby allowing believers to display God's heart by extending divine access to those outside the Christian faith. Although Centring Prayer initially operates on an individual level, it offers significant promise for enhancing the communal aspect of priesthood by nurturing a deeper personal connection with God that better equips believers to fulfil their priestly roles within the community and beyond. Embracing such a contemplative practice could enrich the spiritual lives of Baptists and offer a meaningful avenue for connection to those outside the faith, fostering genuine spiritual encounter and belonging.

Nils J. Engelsen's Baptismal Theology: A Norwegian Baptist Response to Emil Brunner and Karl Barth

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Abstract

This article examines how the baptismal theologies of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth generated renewed mid-twentieth-century debate and how their influence shaped Nils J. Engelsen's constructive theological synthesis. Brunner's emphasis on the divine–human encounter and personal correspondence, together with Barth's christological grounding of baptism and their shared critique of infant baptism, catalysed fresh reflection across Europe. These discussions resonated strongly within Nordic Baptist contexts, where questions of ecclesial identity, discipleship, and the meaning of baptism were particularly acute in predominantly Lutheran cultures. Engelsen's description of baptism as a 'relational symbol' represents a distinctively Norwegian Baptist response to these wider theological developments. By integrating Brunner's personalism with Barth's christocentrism and prophetic symbolism, he articulates a theology of believers' baptism that affirms both divine agency and human response, offering valuable insight for contemporary Baptist reflection on the triune God's agency within the realm of the sacramental practices of the church.

Keywords

Believers' baptism; personal correspondence; prophetic symbolism

Introduction

The resurgence of baptistic sacramentalist theological reflection concerning believers' baptism cannot be understood apart from the theological discussions that took place in the mid-twentieth century, inspired by the Swiss Reformed theologians Emil Brunner (1889–1966) and Karl Barth (1886–1968). Their respective works, Brunner's *Wahrheit*

als *Begegnung* (*The Divine–Human Encounter*,¹ 1938; expanded as *Truth as Encounter*,² 1964) and Barth's lecture *Die kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe* (*The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*,³ delivered in 1943 and published in 1948) ignited what Anthony R. Cross has described as 'the modern baptismal debate'.⁴ Their influence extended far beyond their own Reformed contexts, inspiring discussions among Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists.⁵ Brunner and Barth's works also generated the inspiration for Nordic Baptist theologians to reconsider and to articulate their convictions concerning baptism and faith at that time.

This resulted in two Nordic Baptist theological conferences: Vallersvik (1953) and Stenungsön (1956). These gatherings brought together leading Baptist theologians from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway to reassess the meaning and practice of baptism in light of these theological contributions. The Stenungsön conference resulted in the publication of *Dopet, Dåben, Dåpen* (1957), including papers by scholars Torsten Bergsten from Sweden and Kjell Kyrø-Rasmussen from Denmark, and by Norwegian scholar Nils J. Engelsen.⁶ While each contribution was significant, Engelsen's work proved especially formative for Norwegian Baptist theology and practice. Engelsen's work must be read as a response to the works of Brunner and Barth, and as a foundation for how he further develops his personal theological views on believers' baptism.

This article begins by examining Brunner's theology of encounter and personal correspondence, before turning to Barth's christological grounding of baptism. It then considers their influence on Engelsen's further constructive synthesis, arguing that his theology of baptism as a 'relational symbol' provides a contextual framework for

¹ Emil Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter* (SCM, 1943).

² Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Westminster Press, 1964).

³ Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (SCM Press, 1948).

⁴ Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Paternoster Press, 2000), p. 127.

⁵ *Christian Baptism*, ed. by A. Gilmore (Lutterworth, 1959), pp. 15–24.

⁶ Torsten Bergsten, Kjell Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Nils J. Engelsen, *Dopet - Dåben - Dåpen: Tre Nordiska Teologiska Uppsatser* (Ernst Westerberg, 1957).

understanding believers' baptism within the Norwegian Baptist tradition.

The early twentieth century saw growing dissatisfaction with both the optimism of liberal Protestantism and the rigidities of confessional orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy, represented in different ways by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, sought to recover the primacy of divine revelation, the centrality of Christ, and the necessity of a conscious human response of faith. Engelsen's reflections were shaped by these developments, yet his response constitutes a distinctive and creative Norwegian Baptist contribution, attentive to the particular challenges of Baptist life in Norway.

Brunner's work, *The Divine–Human Encounter* was based on the Olaus Petri lectures at Uppsala University in 1938. His claim that truth is not an object to be grasped but an event of encounter between God and the human person had far-reaching implications for his theology, including his understanding of baptism. In likeness with Brunner, Barth offered a sharp critique of the practice of infant baptism, but with a strong emphasis on baptism as the subjective human response to God's prior act of grace in Jesus Christ.

Despite their differing emphases, both theologians insisted that baptism must be understood within the dynamic relationship between divine initiative and human response. This convergence resonated strongly with Baptists, who emphasised personal faith as essential for baptism, salvation, and church membership. At the same time, Brunner and Barth challenged Baptists to articulate more clearly the theological grounding of their convictions, particularly regarding the gracious agency of God within the baptismal event.

In Scandinavia, where the Lutheran heritage and state church structures shaped religious and cultural life, the question of baptism was particularly important. Infant baptism functioned not only as a theological practice but also as a cultural and civic institution tied to citizenship, national identity, and social belonging.

It is within this context that Nils J. Engelsen's contribution must be understood. As a Norwegian Baptist theologian, Engelsen sought to

articulate a theology of baptism that was faithful to Scripture, informed by contemporary theology, and responsive to the Norwegian Baptist context. His work demonstrates a careful engagement with Brunner and Barth, yet it is not derivative. Engelsen appropriates their insights in a distinctively Baptist manner, emphasising the relational, symbolic, and prophetic symbolic dimensions of baptism.

Accordingly, this article first examines Brunner's theology of encounter and personal correspondence, and the implications of these for his theology of baptism. It then explores Barth's evolving theology of baptism, from his early sacramental realism to his later emphasis on baptism as the human response to divine grace. Finally, it turns to Engelsen, whose synthesis offers a contribution to the theology of believers' baptism within the Norwegian Baptist tradition.

Emil Brunner

Emil Brunner (1889–1966) stands as one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century Protestant theology, and his contribution to the modern baptismal debate cannot be overstated. Brunner's central claim, that truth is not an object to be grasped but an event of encounter between God and human beings provided a conceptual framework for reconsidering the theology and practice of baptism within the church.

Brunner's theology is deeply rooted in the tradition of dialectical theology, yet it bears a distinctive personalist character shaped by the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, Ferdinand Ebner, and Martin Buber. As Mark J. McInroy notes, dialogical personalism rests on the belief that 'the human being is constituted in encounter with another [...] the "I" is in an important sense incomplete without another, the "Thou"'.⁷ This emphasis on relationality permeates Brunner's theology, informing his understanding of all aspects of Christian doctrine.

At the heart of Brunner's theology lies the conviction that God reveals himself not through abstract propositions or metaphysical

⁷ Mark J. McInroy, 'Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1.64 (2011), pp. 45–63 (p. 47).

systems but through personal encounter. Revelation is an event in which God addresses the human person, thereby calling forth a response of faith. In his *Dogmatics*, Brunner argues that the early church did not distinguish between *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which one believes) and *fides quae creditur* (the faith that one believes), because true faith is always both trust and confession, obedience and belief.⁸ Brunner therefore rejects the object–subject antithesis, which he regards as a distortion introduced by Greek philosophy. He stated, “The Biblical understanding of truth cannot be grasped through the Object-Subject antithesis, on the contrary it is falsified through it.”⁹

For Brunner, the object–subject antithesis reduces revelation either to an objective deposit of doctrinal propositions (objectivism) or to a subjective religious experience (subjectivism). Both approaches fail to capture the relational character of biblical revelation, which is grounded in God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the human response of obedient faith.

This relational understanding of revelation leads Brunner to describe the divine–human relationship as ‘*personal correspondence*’.¹⁰ The Word of God awakens faith, and faith expresses itself in trusting obedience. This correspondence is not a symmetrical relationship between equals, but a relationship grounded in God’s gracious initiative and human free response. God’s self-disclosure is always an act of love (*agapē*), and the human response is always an act of obedience-in-trust (*pistis*).¹¹

Brunner’s understanding of faith is central to his theology of baptism. Drawing on the New Testament, he describes faith (*pistis*) as an act that involves the whole person: mind, will, and affections. Faith is ‘obedience in trust’,¹² an act in which the human person responds to God’s self-giving love. This obedience is not coerced, because it arises from the freedom that God grants to humanity. ‘An encounter takes

⁸ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation: Dogmatics*, III (Lutterworth Press, 1964), p. 135.

⁹ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 66.

¹¹ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, pp. 70–71.

¹² Brunner, *Dogmatics*, III, p. 161.

place between God and man,' Brunner writes, 'While God is coming to meet man, He also makes possible man's going to meet Him.'¹³

Faith is therefore both dependence and freedom. It is dependence because the human person relies entirely on God's grace; it is freedom because this dependence is freely chosen. Brunner rejects any notion of faith that reduces it to either mere intellectual assent or emotional experience, claiming that faith is a relational act that binds the believer to Christ and incorporates them into the fellowship of the church.¹⁴

Brunner's theology cannot be understood apart from recognising the influence of dialogical personalists. Søren Kierkegaard's critique of objectivism and his emphasis on the subjective appropriation of truth provided Brunner with a framework for challenging the object–subject antithesis. While Karl Barth initially drew on Kierkegaard in his early work, he later distanced himself from what he perceived as Kierkegaard's anthropocentric subjectivism. Brunner, however, embraced Kierkegaard's insights more fully, integrating them into his theology of revelation and faith.¹⁵

Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber further shaped Brunner's relational anthropology. Buber's distinction between the 'I–It' and 'I–Thou' modes of existence offered Brunner a conceptual vocabulary for articulating the relational character of revelation. In the 'I–It' relation, the other is objectified and held at a distance; in the 'I–Thou' relation, the other is encountered in freedom and reciprocity. For Brunner, genuine knowledge of God belongs to the sphere of 'I–Thou', where God addresses the human person and calls forth a response of faith.¹⁶

¹³ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Cynthia Bennett Brown, 'The Personal Imperative of Revelation: Emil Brunner, Dogmatics and Theological Existence', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 65.4 (2012), pp. 421–434 (p.434).

¹⁵ Curtis L. Thompson, 'Emil Brunner: Polemically Promoting Kierkegaard's Christian Philosophy of Encounter', in *Volume 10, Tome I: Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: German Protestant Theology*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources (Taylor & Francis, 2016), pp. 65–103 (p. 73).

¹⁶ Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, pp. 19–39.

Brunner applies Buber's relational categories to ecclesiology and sacramental theology, arguing that the church and its practices must reflect the relational character of divine revelation. Brunner's relational theology has crucial implications for his understanding of baptism. For Brunner, baptism is not merely a ritual act of commitment or a sacramental impartation of salvific grace; it is a relational event in which God and the believer meet in personal correspondence. Baptism involves both God's gracious act of regeneration, forgiveness, and cleansing, *and* the believer's active response of faith, confession, and identification with Christ.¹⁷

Brunner therefore insists that baptism must be a two-sided event. 'Baptism is not merely a gift to man,' he writes, 'but also an active receiving and confession on the part of man.'¹⁸ This reciprocity is essential to the meaning of baptism. If baptism is separated from personal faith, the relational correspondence is broken, and the rite becomes an empty ritual. This emphasis on the relational character of believers' baptism was later reflected in George Beasley-Murray's description of it as the 'trysting place of the sinner with his Saviour'.¹⁹

This leads Brunner to a sharp critique of infant baptism. He argues that infant baptism disrupts the unity of faith and baptism by separating the act of baptism from a person's conscious response. The Reformed principle *nullum sacramentum sine fide* (no sacrament without faith) is violated when baptism is administered to those who are incapable of conscious faith.²⁰

Brunner further argues that the practice of infant baptism has contributed to the institutionalisation of the church and the blurring of the distinction between the church and the world. He notes that many who have been baptised as infants later reject the faith, leading him to ask the question:

¹⁷ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 181.

¹⁸ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 178.

¹⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (Macmillan, 1966), p. 41.

²⁰ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 179–180.

What does the fact of having been baptised mean for the large number of contemporary people who do not know and do not even care to know whether they have been baptised?²¹

He concludes that 'the contemporary practice of infant baptism can hardly be regarded as being anything short of scandalous'.²²

Brunner's critique of infant baptism and his emphasis on personal faith resonated strongly with Baptists, who had long insisted on the necessity of a personal confession of faith as the basis for baptism and regenerate church membership. Brunner's insistence that baptism must be an expression of personal correspondence between God and the believer aligns closely with the Baptist conviction that baptism is the outward expression of an inward faith.

At the same time, Brunner's emphasis on the communal and relational dimensions of faith challenges overly individualistic interpretations of baptism. Baptism is not merely a personal testimony but an act that incorporates the believer into the church. He states,

Indeed, baptism, precisely as this free confession of man, is the stipulation for the individual's joining the Church. Baptism is not only an act of grace, but just as much an act of confession stemming from the act of grace.²³

Brunner thus offers a corrective to both sacramental objectivism and revivalist subjectivism, providing a balanced account of baptism as a relational event grounded in God's grace and expressed in the human response of faith.

Karl Barth

Karl Barth (1886–1968) exerted an equally significant influence on the modern baptismal debate. Although Barth and Brunner diverged sharply on several doctrinal issues, not least natural theology, their respective treatments of baptism share a common concern: the need to recover the dynamic relationship between divine grace and human response in the act. Barth's theology of baptism developed over several

²¹ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 181.

²² Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 183.

²³ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 178.

decades, from his early reflections in *Der Römerbrief* (1919; 1922) to his 1943 lecture *Die kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe* (*The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, published in 1948), and finally to the fragmentary but important treatment in *Church Dogmatics IV/4* (1967). Across these works, Barth's thought displays both continuity and development, but the central thread remains clear: baptism is grounded entirely in the free, sovereign act of Jesus Christ.

Barth's earliest reflections on baptism appear in the first and second editions of *Der Römerbrief*. Here, Barth stands firmly within the Reformed sacramental tradition, drawing on Calvin's definition of a sacrament as 'a visible sign of a sacred thing, or a visible form of an invisible grace'.²⁴ For the younger Barth, baptism is a human act performed within the life of the church, yet its meaning and power derive entirely from the gracious act of God in Christ that it signifies, stating that baptism 'carries no power other than that generated by the graceful act of God in Christ that it represents'.²⁵

Barth denies attributing to baptism any independent salvific efficacy, believing that baptism is sacramental only in the sense that it is a sign and seal of God's grace, not a channel of grace in its own right. 'Like all the Church's acts', Barth insists, baptism is 'plainly a human act', yet as part of the church's proclamation it is also 'a free word and act of Jesus Christ himself'.²⁶ This reflects Barth's broader understanding of the church's ministry as a witness to the objective reality of God's saving work in Christ.

Barth's early sacramental theology thus emphasises the absolute sovereignty of Christ in the impartation of grace. The sacrament does not effect salvation; it bears witness to the salvation already accomplished in Christ. Therefore, God's gracious salvific intent is not dependent upon baptism, but rather revealed and realised in the power of Jesus Christ which is 'the only power in baptism'.²⁷ He further

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.1, online version, reformed.org <<https://reformed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Calvin-Institutes-of-Christian-Religion.pdf>> [accessed 28 May 2026], p. 779.

²⁵ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 16.

²⁶ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 17.

²⁷ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 23.

reiterates this, stating, 'And let us remember that the power of baptism lies in the free word and deed of Jesus Christ. Our baptism is no more the cause of our redemption than is our faith.'²⁸

Barth develops this theme further by describing baptism as a 'seal' (*obsignare*) of Christ's saving work. Drawing on Pauline language, he argues that baptism functions as the divine confirmation of the salvation already given in Christ and received in faith. 'In baptism,' Barth writes, 'Jesus Christ seals the letter He has written in His person and with His work and which we by faith in Him have already received.'²⁹ Barth's emphasis on baptism as 'seal' is based on his conviction that it is the visible sign of the invisible *nativitas spiritualis*, the new birth that occurs through the Holy Spirit.³⁰ This then provides Barth with a foundation for employing the strong sacramental language of the New Testament, noting that Baptism 'saves', 'sanctifies', 'purifies', 'mediates forgiveness', and 'effects new birth', while continually maintaining that these effects belong to Christ's work, not to the rite itself.³¹ The significance of baptism is entirely derivative of Christ's saving work. The sacrament does not add anything to Christ's work; it bears witness to it. This christocentric grounding distinguishes Barth's approach from both sacramental objectivism and revivalist subjectivism. Baptism is neither a magical rite nor a merely human testimony; it is a symbolic act in which Christ himself is the true agent.

A central feature of Barth's baptismal theology is his interpretation of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. For Barth, this event is not merely an historical precursor to Christian baptism but the theological foundation of the practice. Jesus's baptism signifies his identification with sinners and anticipates his death and resurrection. In submitting to baptism, Jesus takes upon himself the burden of human sin and inaugurates the covenant of grace.³²

²⁸ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 27.

²⁹ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 29–30.

³⁰ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 11.

³¹ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 19.

³² Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 17–18.

Barth argues that Jesus's baptism is paradigmatic for believers. Just as Jesus identified with sinners in his baptism, so believers identify with Christ in theirs. Baptism becomes 'a living and expressive representation of Christ's high-priestly death and resurrection'.³³ The believer, in being baptised, participates symbolically in Christ's death to sin and new life in God (Rom 6:1–11). This participation is not merely metaphorical; it marks a decisive transition of allegiance, a turning from the old life of sin to the new life of obedience.

Barth's interpretation of Romans 6 is particularly significant. He insists that baptism signifies not only the forgiveness of sins but the death of the sinner. 'Not only his sins and he not only in his character as a sinner, but really, he himself as a subject, met his death then and there.'³⁴ Baptism thus marks the end of the old self and the beginning of a new existence in Christ. This existential transformation emphasises the ethical and moral implications of baptism which Barth later describes as the believer's 'coming of age' for mature Christian discipleship.³⁵

Barth also emphasises the eschatological dimension of baptism. Baptism stands at the centre of the believer's existence, pointing both backwards to the forgiveness of sins and forwards to a life of obedience and hope. It is a sign of the believer's incorporation into the church and their participation in the coming kingdom of God. As Barth writes, baptism 'has its full honour in being the most living and expressive picture of that history: the visible sign of the invisible *nativitas spiritualis* at the entrance gate of the Church and at the beginning of every Christian life'.³⁶

This eschatological orientation reinforces the ethical dimension of baptism. The believer is not only assured of God's grace but placed

³³ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 18.

³⁴ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 11.

³⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4: (Fragment) The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (T&T Clark International, 2004), p. x.

³⁶ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 11.

under divine obligation. Baptism is both gift and command, assurance and commission. It marks the beginning of a life lived in service to God and in witness to the coming reign of Christ.

Barth's emphasis on the free human response to God's grace leads him to a critical stance toward infant baptism. While he does not deny the possibility of divine grace operating in the lives of infants, he insists that baptism, as a human act of obedience, requires the conscious participation of the one being baptised. It requires the 'responsible willingness and readiness of the baptised person to receive the promise of grace directed towards him and to be party to the pledge of allegiance concerning the graceful service demanded of him'.³⁷ An infant, Barth argues, cannot fulfil this requirement. The infant is a passive recipient (*Behandelter*), not an active partner (*Handelnder*). Baptism administered without the conscious faith of the baptised is therefore '*not correct*'.³⁸ Barth's critique is not merely practical but theological. Infant baptism obscures the essential structure of grace and response that baptism is meant to embody. It risks reducing baptism to a magical rite or a cultural convention, detached from the personal faith that provides it meaning.

Barth's perspectives on baptism evolved throughout the course of his career and seemed to take a dramatic turn (what he called a 'reorientation') towards the end of his life.³⁹ He distanced himself from his earlier work on baptism, indicating that his changes in perspective were largely due to the inspiration of his son Markus Barth, who convinced him to assume a non-sacramental view of baptism through the exegetical conclusions found in his work *Die Taufe – Ein Sakrament?* from 1951.⁴⁰ Barth's later views on baptism are seen by most as a radical departure from his early perspectives, but there are others who, while

³⁷ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 40.

³⁸ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 41. Italics original.

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. x.

⁴⁰ Markus Barth, *Die Taufe- Ein Sakrament?: Ein Exegetischer Beitrag Zum Gespräch Über Die Kirchliche Taufe* (Evangelischer Verlag, 1951).

still acknowledging some major changes in his views, still consider his final word on the subject to be truly faithful to the full scope of his theology.⁴¹

In his later theology of baptism, Karl Barth argues for the absolute sovereignty of divine agency in conversion and salvation thereby marking a distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism. The turning of the human person toward God in faith is, for Barth, an event grounded wholly in God's free and unconditional act of grace; it is God alone who awakens faith, creates obedience, and brings the believer into the sphere of reconciliation.⁴² Within this framework, water baptism assumes the character of a subjective human act, a responsive act of obedience, commitment, and embodied prayer, that arises only because God has previously acted decisively in Christ. Because salvation rests entirely on Christ's death and resurrection, the human act of baptism can only be a petition that God's prior act of grace be made effective in the believer.⁴³ Baptism therefore possesses no independent salvific efficacy but is the believer's response to the divine initiative, bearing with it a lifelong ethical commitment to the cause of Christ. It becomes thereby a public act made possible and motivated solely by the prior work of grace.⁴⁴ Barth therefore presents baptism not as a means of grace but as the believer's public testimony to the spiritual regeneration worked in their prior conversion, and as an ethical consequence of God's reconciling work.⁴⁵

This stands in marked contrast to Emil Brunner, who, while affirming the primacy of divine revelation and grace, places greater emphasis on the relational reciprocity between God and the human

⁴¹ Daniel Migliore, 'Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism: The Challenge of Karl Barth', in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. by David Willis and Michael Welker (Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 494–511 (p. 499). Migliore emphasises that all views on baptism have their basis in a particular theological context. He comments, 'What Barth says about baptism in CD IV/4 is a key to the intention of the whole of the Church Dogmatics: to affirm the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ as the basis and goal of true human freedom in partnership with God' (p.499).

⁴² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 72.

⁴³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, pp. 210–211.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 106.

person. In *The Divine–Human Encounter*, Brunner describes the meeting between God and the believer in baptism as a genuine I–Thou event, in which the human response is not merely the ethical consequence of divine action but an essential element of the encounter itself. Brunner explains as follows:

In baptism it is God first and Sovereign who acts, who forgives sin, who cleanses man and regenerates him. But man too acts in baptism. He allows his cleansing of himself to take place. He lets himself to be drawn into the death of Christ. He confesses his faith and his attachment to Christ. Baptism is not merely a gift to men, but also an act of receiving and confession on the part of man.⁴⁶

Brunner further states that

baptism is the point of transition from the death of the old man to new being and life in Christ. Thus the act of baptism as such was simply regarded as one with the inner event, so that it might appear that without the act of baptism this inner event could not take place.⁴⁷

Thus, Brunner emphasises the sacramental efficacy of baptism when accompanied by conscious faith.

Brunner and Barth's works provided a robust theological grounding for believers' baptism. Consequently, their influence on the Nordic Baptist context was considerable. Their critique of infant baptism resonated strongly in a region where Lutheran state church structures had long tied baptism to citizenship and cultural identity. Barth's later emphasis on the ethical consequences of salvation and water baptism called attention to the necessity of commitment to the missional task of the church. However, this unfortunately reinforced a non-sacramental interpretation of believers' baptism, something Barth himself termed 'Neo-Zwinglian',⁴⁸ thereby placing an undue emphasis on the believer's subjective act of obedience and ethical resolve within baptism, while not acknowledging it as a means of grace.

Brunner, by contrast, understood baptism as the concrete sphere in which the regenerative, personal encounter between the triune

⁴⁶ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 178.

⁴⁷ Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation: Dogmatics*, III, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 130.

God and the believer becomes visible and enacted. While he firmly rejected any notion of automatic sacramental efficacy, he nevertheless retained a genuinely sacramental understanding of baptism as the God-appointed form in which divine grace is imparted when God's saving initiative meets human faith and obedience.

Nils J. Engelsen: Relational Symbol and Prophetic Enactment

Engelsen's most significant theological influence among Norwegian Baptists was exercised through his long tenure as rector of the Norwegian Baptist Theological Seminary, a position he held from 1950 to 1985. Although his published writings are limited in scope, his formative impact on generations of ministers was substantial, shaped through decades of teaching, institutional leadership, and pastoral formation. His influence was further extended through his extensive participation in both national and international ecumenical dialogue processes.⁴⁹

While Brunner and Barth provided the broader theological framework for renewed reflection on baptism, Engelsen's unique contribution lies in his account of baptism as a 'relational symbol', which he understood as a symbolic act that not only signifies but also enacts the relationship between God and the believer.⁵⁰

Engelsen provided a response to the works of Brunner and Barth while serving as a Baptist theologian within a predominantly Lutheran state church context. The practice of infant baptism was deeply embedded in Norwegian society, tied not only to church affiliation but also to cultural and civic identity. His paper at Stenungsön,⁵¹ later supplemented by his essay 'The Meaning of

⁴⁹ Peder A. Eidberg and Tarald Rasmussen, 'Nils Johan Engelsen', *Store norske leksikon* <https://snl.no/Nils_Johan_Engelsen> [accessed 8 May 2026].

⁵⁰ Nils J. Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening', *Baptist: Tidsskrift for Baptistisk Historie, Teologi Og Praksis*, 1.18 (2014), pp. 3–15 (p. 14).

⁵¹ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dâpen*.

Baptism',⁵² indicates that he was fully conversant with contemporary theological currents yet firmly rooted in the Norwegian Baptist tradition.

Engelsen's response to Brunner and Barth centred on the relationship between baptism and faith. Here Engelsen largely reiterates Brunner's view of saving faith as the human response to the divine revelation of the Word,⁵³ thereby concluding that 'faith is an act that must encompass all of one's personality'.⁵⁴ At the same time, Engelsen addresses the theological differences between Baptist and Lutheran baptismal practice.⁵⁵ The requirement of a conscious faith response in those being baptised was, and still remains, the main obstacle to consensus with traditions practising infant baptism, which was an issue Engelsen engaged directly and vigorously:

In the New Testament sense of the word, faith is of course something one seeks in vain in an infant. Its personality exists only in potential form, also in the religious sense. If infant baptism had not become an ingrained practice that needed defending, it is unlikely that anyone would have thought to reduce faith to impersonal helplessness, nature-bound passivity, instinctive capacity for nourishment, and so on, as we now sometimes hear.⁵⁶

Engelsen further presents the central concept in his theology of baptism which fully embraces Brunner's presentation of baptism as a manifestation of 'the divine-human encounter'. However, being fully conscious of the context from which he is responding, he chooses to avoid any description of baptism as 'sacramental'.⁵⁷ While fully incorporating Brunner's emphasis upon 'personal correspondence',⁵⁸ he chooses rather to define baptism as a '*relational symbol*'.⁵⁹ Drawing on Brunner's personalism and Barth's christocentrism, Engelsen argues

⁵² Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening'.

⁵³ Brunner, *The Divine Human Encounter*, pp. 66–77.

⁵⁴ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dåpen*, pp. 52–62.

⁵⁵ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dåpen*, pp. 55–61.

⁵⁶ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dåpen*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ In the Scandinavian context at the time of Engelsen's response, the words 'sacrament' and 'sacramental' carried negative associations for Baptists because they were viewed as referring to an *ex opere operato* view of what they chose to describe as 'ordinances'.

⁵⁸ Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening'.

⁵⁹ Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening', pp. 13–15.

that baptism is not merely a sign that points to an external reality but a symbolic action that both participates in, and enacts that reality. A relational symbol is a symbolic act that both creates and expresses relationship.

Engelsen illustrates this through two analogies: the raising of a flag and the human embrace. The raising of a flag does not merely symbolise allegiance; it enacts it. The act of hoisting the flag is itself a declaration of loyalty and identity. Similarly, an embrace does not merely *signify* love and affection; it *performs* love and affection in the giving and receiving of an embrace. Both actions are symbolic, yet their symbolic character is inseparable from the relational reality they bring into being.⁶⁰

Engelsen applies this logic to baptism. Baptism is a symbolic act, but not merely a representation of an inward reality. It is a prophetic enactment; a performative gesture in which the believer publicly enacts repentance, faith, and union with Christ, and in which God works forgiveness, cleansing, and incorporation into the *ekklesia*. The symbol and the reality are not identical, but they are inseparably bound in the relational event.⁶¹ He stated,

In believers' baptism, salvation is 'set in motion' for the candidate that is baptised. The work of Christ is actualised for the individual. It is in light of this act, that the life that follows must be viewed and lived. Salvation is initiated and will be completed in the coming of Christ. As the prophetic acts initiated and 'created' the future, baptism 'initiates' the life of salvation.⁶²

This understanding allows Engelsen to affirm both the divine and human dimensions of baptism without collapsing one into the other. Baptism is neither a purely divine act nor a purely human testimony. It is a relational symbol in which God and the believer meet in personal correspondence. Although Engelsen does not cite him, it seems likely that his perspectives were derived from H. Wheeler Robinson's description of the character of prophetic enactment in the

⁶⁰ Tor Egil Mikalsen, 'Dåpen Som Relasjonssymbol: Et Viktig Bidrag i Nils J. Engelsen Teologi', *Seminariets Venner*, 15.1 (1991), no page numbers.

⁶¹ Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening', p. 13.

⁶² Bergsten, Kyrö-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Døben - Dāpen*, p. 58.

Old Testament. When relating this concept to the sacramental realism of believers' baptism, Robinson asserts,

There can no charge of Sacramental 'Magic', for the baptised person is a conscious believer, and the efficacy of the rite depends on his conscious and believing participation in it. But equally, there can be no question of mere symbolism for the act is the partial and fragmentary, but very real accomplishment of a divine work, the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶³

Similarly, George Beasley-Murray also refers to the concept of 'prophetic symbolism' in relation to the baptism of John. In building upon Robinson's insights, Beasley-Murray states that 'the chief element in that outlook would be the belief that the word of the Lord can be performed as well as spoken, and that such prophetic action has sacramental character'.⁶⁴

While Engelsen's perspectives are not fully original, his account of baptism as relational symbol enables him to hold together the two concerns that dominated the modern baptismal debate: the primacy of divine grace and the necessity of a personal response of faith. On the one hand, baptism requires personal faith because the relational symbol cannot be enacted without the believer's conscious participation. Just as one cannot be truly embraced without consenting to the embrace, so baptism cannot fulfil its symbolic function without the believer's voluntary confession of Christ. In this respect, Engelsen stands with Brunner in insisting that infant baptism disrupts the unity of faith and baptism by severing the relational reciprocity that the symbol requires.

In this way Engelsen also maintains that baptism is fundamentally grounded in the agency of God. The believer's action is always secondary to God's prior act of grace. In the baptismal event, God acts to forgive, cleanse, and incorporate; the believer acts to

⁶³ H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (Nisbet & Co., 1928), pp. 192–194 (quotation p. 194). See also H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 35–36, 185, 227. George Beasley-Murray later refers to the concept of prophetic symbolism in relation to the baptism of John. George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 43.

⁶⁴ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 43.

confess, surrender, and follow. The relational symbol thus preserves both divine initiative and human response without reducing baptism to either a magical rite or a mere human testimony.

Engelsen's synthesis reflects a careful reading of both Brunner and Barth. He affirms Barth's insistence that Christ is the true agent in baptism, and in likeness with Brunner he also emphasises the necessity of the believer's free response. Baptism is the event in which the believer's personal correspondence with God is enacted in a real symbolic act that is both divine and human. While not describing baptism as a sacramental act, the underlying concept of symbolic realism attributes it with sacramental efficacy.

Engelsen's baptismal theology anticipated several themes later developed by Baptist sacramentalist theologians.⁶⁵ He moved beyond the symbolic confessionalism typically associated with Baptist practice in his context by presenting baptism as a relational and prophetic symbol in which divine and human action converge. Although later Baptist sacramentalist theologians offered more systematic accounts, Engelsen demonstrates that Nordic Baptists were already engaging, and in some respects anticipating, this wider conversation. Engelsen's emphasis on baptism as a 'relational symbol' demonstrates that a sacramental retrieval of believers' baptism was already emerging among Scandinavian Baptist theologians influenced by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ His work in the mid-1950s pre-dated R. E. O. White's *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), George Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1962) and *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (Macmillan, 1966), as well as Alec Gilmore's edited volumes on baptism (*Christian Baptism* (Lutterworth, 1959); *Baptism and Christian Unity* (Lutterworth, 1967)). This later development is evident in the work of Anthony R. Cross, Paul S. Fiddes, John Colwell, Stanley Fowler, Philip E. Thompson, among many others, who variously emphasise baptism as a means of grace, participation in the triune life, incorporation into the church, and a transformative act of discipleship.

⁶⁶ This was also evidenced in the works of the contributors to Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Däpen*.

Conclusion

In comparing the perspectives of Brunner, Barth, and Engelsen one notes both similarities and differences that characterised the discussions and debates concerning baptism in the mid-twentieth century.

All three theologians emphasise the relational character of baptism. For Brunner, baptism is the manifestation of personal correspondence between God and the believer. For Barth, baptism is the believer's participation in Christ's death and resurrection and a confessional act of commitment. For Engelsen, baptism is a real relational symbol that enacts and manifests the divine-human relationship. Through presenting baptism as a relational symbol, Engelsen both avoids the use of sacramental terminology that would hinder its reception, while presenting it as an act that carries with it salvific efficacy as a means of grace when performed in faith. His approach provides a theological framework that is both faithful to Baptist convictions, while also incorporating the perspectives of Brunner and Barth in his work.

All three also insist on the necessity of personal faith. Brunner repudiates the practice of infant baptism because it separates baptism from conscious faith. Barth critiques infant baptism because it lacks the responsible maturity required for baptism. Engelsen argues that the relational symbol cannot be enacted without the believer's voluntary participation.

Despite these similarities, there are significant differences. Brunner's theology is grounded in personalism and emphasises the relational character of revelation. Barth's theology is grounded in Christology and emphasises the objective reality of Christ's saving work. Engelsen synthesises these approaches, integrating Brunner's relational personalism with Barth's christocentric focus and Robinson's application of prophetic symbolism.

Engelsen's distinctive contribution lies in his development of the relational symbol, which allows him to affirm both the divine and human dimensions of baptism without collapsing one into the other. His synthesis provides a constructive alternative to both sacramental

objectivism and revivalist subjectivism. His theology affirms the primacy of divine grace while emphasising the necessity of human response while recognising believers' baptism as a symbolic act with sacramental realism. This balanced approach offers a robust theological grounding for Baptist practice in a context where infant baptism remains the dominant ecclesial norm.

Finally, Engelsen's approach also challenges overly individualistic interpretations of baptism. Baptism is not merely a private decision but a public act that binds the believer to the community of faith. The relational symbol also emphasises the communal dimension of baptism, reminding Baptists that faith is always lived in fellowship with others.

The modern baptismal debate, initiated by the works of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, provided the theological impetus for renewed reflection on baptism within the Nordic Baptist context. Brunner's emphasis on divine-human encounter and personal correspondence, and Barth's insistence on Christ's sovereign agency and the ethical commitment of baptism, challenged Baptists to articulate more clearly the theological grounding of their convictions and practices.

Nils J. Engelsen's contribution represents a significant voice in this development. Like Brunner, Engelsen emphasised the necessity of the conscious human response of faith to the self-disclosure of God in Christ within the context of believers' baptism. However, he deliberately avoided sacramental terminology that Norwegian Baptists associated with the practice of infant baptism, which allowed him to affirm the dynamic reciprocity of the divine-human encounter without invoking sacramental categories that he knew carried unhelpful theological baggage.

Engelsen further developed this relational account by drawing on the prophetic symbolism of the Old Testament. He argued that symbolic actions performed by the prophets were not merely illustrative but instrumental in effecting the reality they signified. In a similar way, believers' baptism functions as a prophetic and relational act that enacts and effectuates the believer's participation in the life of the triune God. For Engelsen, baptism is therefore not simply a public confession of

faith but a symbolic act through which God brings about spiritual regeneration, forgiveness, and incorporation into the church. Consequently, his theology of baptism as relational symbol provides a theological framework that is both faithful to Baptist convictions and responsive to the theological concerns of his contemporaries.

Nils J. Engelsen's work in the mid-1950s pre-dated the major British Baptist contributions that would later shape the resurgence of Baptist sacramental reflection. Within the Norwegian Baptist context, believers' baptism had historically been regarded primarily as a symbolic and confessional act, an outward testimony to an inward spiritual transformation believed to have occurred at conversion. Yet the theological discussions stimulated by the works of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth prompted a significant re-examination of this assumption. Their emphasis on the relational and participatory dimensions of faith encouraged Baptist theologians to reconsider the salvific efficacy of believers' baptism when performed in faith. Increasingly, a consensus has emerged among many Baptist scholars that a purely symbolic and confessional interpretation of baptism is neither theologically adequate nor biblically warranted. In this respect, Engelsen stands among a diverse group of Baptist theologians across Europe and North America who, from the mid-twentieth century, have re-evaluated the relationship between divine agency, symbolic action, and ecclesiological identity.

Engelsen's work thus represents an important early Nordic voice within the broader retrieval of Baptist sacramental theology that has since developed within Baptist theology.

A Story of Estonian Baptist Theological Education, 1922–1989¹

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Abstract

The Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary was established in 1922 and renamed the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary in 1932. However, self-study, opportunities to study abroad, and local short-term Bible courses remained significant. Based on archival materials and published sources, this article argues that theological education remained an integral part of Estonian Baptist identity even during the Communist period, when the seminary was closed. Instead, Baptist leaders organised study groups, conducted correspondence courses between 1956 and 1960, published mimeographed study materials, and provided opportunities for individuals to take examinations independently. A number of former seminary graduates continued to serve faithfully in local churches despite external pressures. In addition, the article argues that informal friendship circles, such as the so-called Haraka Institute, functioned as contexts for theological learning. These circles were more flexible than the study groups led by the ECB Union leadership, and their agendas were determined by the participants themselves. Maintaining theological education during these years paved the way for the re-establishment of the seminary in 1989.

Keywords

Estonian Baptists; formal and informal theological education; Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary; Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary; informal friendship circles

Introduction

The Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary has borne different names over time, yet throughout the years, since its founding in 1922, it has fulfilled its primary mission: to prepare Christian workers capable of

¹ The Estonian version of this article was first published in *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri* [The Journal of Theology], 1 (2022), pp. 98–126.

fulfilling different roles in the church. To this main task one may add the promotion of independent theological thinking, focusing on free church identity while still preserving the capacity for dialogue with other traditions. Initially, however, the work of the seminary was orientated primarily towards the needs of Baptists.

During the Soviet period, theological education was potentially a form of silent protest against atheistic pressures. It was not possible to operate officially; short courses and study groups served the purpose of strengthening the identity of the diverse Union of Estonian Evangelical Christians and Baptists (ECB) that from 1945 onwards included, besides Baptists, also Pentecostals along with Evangelical Christian Free Church and Revivalist Free Church (Estonian: *priikogudus*) members. The training activities supported ministers in their duties, and it was there that leaders of the Union noticed young people who had a gift and calling for pastoral work.

The official reopening of the seminary in 1989 and the following years fall outside the scope of this article. Somewhat more than is customary, the present text pays attention to non-formal modes of learning during Communist times, such as gatherings of ministers, short courses, or circles of friends interested in theology. Theological exploration, connecting the Bible with everyday life, and acquiring practical pastoral care and mission skills were an inseparable part of the historical identity of Estonian Baptists.

Short Courses as a Flexible Form of Training

From their earliest years, Estonian Baptists have valued education — partly inspired by German models, and partly because they recognised that systematic knowledge supports apologetic argumentation and helps to interpret faith more deeply.² Theological discussions were taking place at Baptist conferences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These events were not just business meetings, but also environments for informal conversations. The first such conference was

² Toivo Pilli, 'Finding a Balance between Church and Academia: Baptist Theological Education in Estonia', *Religion in Eastern Europe*, 26.3 (2006), pp. 17–43 (pp. 18–19).

held in Haapsalu in 1886, and thereafter every few years, though not regularly. Harald Victor Dahl wrote, ‘These conferences were mainly intended to address various practical issues of religious life and to explain passages of the Bible.’³ Such exchanges helped to clarify how to interpret, in theological terms, the questions that arose in congregational life.

Theological topics were also addressed in Bible courses, which were likewise organised as early as the late nineteenth century. Here, the organisers determined the direction of instruction, although open discussions continued to play an important role. Adam Reinhold Schiewe, pastor of the German Baptist Church in St. Petersburg and overseer of the emerging congregations in Estonia, arranged a six-week course in Haapsalu in 1890.⁴ Lectures and prayer went hand in hand. Schiewe himself was the main teacher, with translation provided by an Estonian preacher, August Johannson. In the evenings, students preached in the Haapsalu prayer house, basing their message on independent study of biblical passages. Schiewe set revivalist goals for the course. Indeed, as a result of the students’ sermons, seventy people were said to have experienced religious conversion, ‘most of whom joined the congregation’.⁵

Training courses continued to be organised; for example in the early twentieth century at Laitse Manor under the initiative of Baron Woldemar von Üxküll, a Baltic German nobleman who had turned to the Baptist faith. After the First World War, the need for training appears only to have increased. In 1921, a larger course was held in Ridala, where subjects included the history of Baptists, children’s

³ Harald Victor Dahl, ‘Ülevaade Liidust’ [A Survey of the Union], in *50 aastat apostlite radadel* [50 Years in the Footsteps of the Apostles], ed. by Richard Kaups (E. B. K. Liidu Kirjastus, 1934), pp. 17–22 (p. 19).

⁴ Üllas Linder, *Adam Reinhold Schiewe: Esimese Eesti baptistikoguduse rajaja elulugu* [Adam Reinhold Schiewe: Biography of the Founder of the First Baptist Church in Estonia], *Dissertationes Theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis* 49 (Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus, 2024), p. 123.

⁵ Martin Schmidt, ‘Eesti baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse loost’ [About the Story of Estonian Baptist Preacher’s Theological Education], in *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, ed. by Richard Kaups (E. B. K. Liidu Kirjastus, 1934), pp. 174–180 (p. 175).

religious education, the history of missions, evangelism, and an introduction to the knowledge of the Bible. In addition, more specialised courses were arranged, and sometimes the training took place in local churches bringing together participants mostly from the host congregation.⁶ Between 1904 and 1940, the Baptist magazine *Teekäija* [The Wayfarer] was published, serving the purpose of spiritual education and fostering unity among congregations. Although not explicitly intended as a training tool, it published many instructional materials that helped to shape Estonian Baptist educational life and spirituality.⁷

Let us now look more closely at a training course held in Tallinn, 2–11 November 1919, the programme of which has been preserved in the archive of the Estonian ECB Union. The main venue for delivering lectures was the Filadelfia (historically Viladelfia) prayer house on Slobodka Street in Tallinn. The instruction was intended for ‘preaching brothers, workers in the Kingdom of God, and believers in general’. Participants were welcomed by the elder of the congregation (minister) Voldemar Korjus. The opening day was intended for a broader audience, with an address by Andres Tetermann, leader of the Baptist Union. A combined choir and string ensemble from Tallinn Baptist congregations also performed. On the following days, teaching was provided by Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok, Hendrik Tuttar, Ernst Mill, August Johansson, and others — all outstanding figures among Estonian Baptists of the time. The course was made into a special event with worship, music, and well-known teachers. It is also worth noting that innovative subjects were addressed. For example, participants were introduced to *pastorale theologie* or ‘the art of shepherding’. Ernst Mill taught *psychologie* or ‘the science of the soul’, and the programme also included ‘the teaching of how to teach’, that is, pedagogy or, more

⁶ Schmidt, ‘Eesti baptisti jutlustajate’, pp. 175–177.

⁷ Toivo Pilli, ‘Eesti Baptistid ja nende teoloogilise mõtte kajastumine ajakirjas “Teekäija” kuni 1940’ [Estonian Baptists and their Theology as Reflected in Teekäija until 1940] (unpublished master’s thesis, Tartu University, 1996), p. 68.

specifically, didactics. As expected, the curriculum also covered ‘the art of preaching’, the history of faith (likely meaning the history of Christianity), and subjects aimed at deepening knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.⁸

Methodologically, the instruction was not limited to lectures; discussions were also held. This actively engaged the participants and helped to reinforce what they had heard. Saturday evening prayer meetings and Sunday worship services took place in different Baptist churches (then usually called ‘prayer houses’ in Estonia). Monday, 10 November, was St. Martin’s Day, and a special meeting was held, where Martin Luther was introduced as a reformer and preacher who emphasised the authority of Scripture. Naturally, the topic of ‘the Reformation and infant baptism’ could not be avoided; here, Baptists had their own perspective, rejecting paedobaptism, which they considered important to explain. At this worship and lecture gathering, a choir performed, and brass instruments added to the atmosphere. On the final day of the Bible course, the guests included Karl Leopold Marley from the Evangelical Christian Free Church, and Adam Podin who was an ‘alliance-minded’ Baptist.⁹ Theological education thus crossed denominational boundaries. The course concluded once again with an address by Andres Tetermann at a worship service held on Uus-Kalamaja Street no. 23 (in the Kalju Baptist Church as it is known today), where brass music, choral singing, and string ensemble performances were again part of the programme. Baptists demonstrated sensitivity to context and a readiness to teach new subjects; they turned

⁸ Eesti Baptisti Ühenduse Piibli-Kursus 1919, Kava. [The Estonian Baptist Association Bible Course 1919, Schedule], Väiketrükised: 1945 ja varasemad, 2. The Archive of the Union of Estonian Evangelical Christians and Baptists (hereafter EEKBLA). The Archive is presently located in Tartu in the building of Salem Baptist Church.

⁹ For more about Podin and his pan-evangelical links, see Toivo Pilli, ‘Adam Podin: An Estonian Baptist with International Links and Pan-Evangelical Vision’, in *Grounded in Grace: Essays to Honour Ian M. Randall*, ed. by Pieter J. Lalleman, Peter J. Morden, and Anthony R. Cross (Spurgeon’s College and Baptist Historical Society, 2013), pp. 103–117.

the training into a major event that encouraged local congregations. The 1919 course shows that education has the ability to transcend confessional boundaries.¹⁰

These courses at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century provided a strong foundation for planning a more systematic form of education — the establishment of a seminary. For this, support and resources from outside Estonia, from the international Baptist community, were needed, but the readiness of Estonian Baptists themselves was also essential. This readiness was further strengthened by the fact that several Estonian Baptist preachers had studied theology abroad. Between 1893 and 1922, about a dozen Estonian Baptists studied at the seminary in Hamburg-Horn, usually for one or two years.¹¹ Among them were August Johannson, Martin Schmidt, Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok, and Daniel Matson. The latter two had also pursued further studies at the seminary in Łódź between 1908 and 1910.¹² Preachers who had studied in Germany undoubtedly gained a more systematic understanding of theology, as well as preparation — or at least the motivation — to pass on their knowledge. A vision emerged of what seminary education could offer, how it could be organised, and how it could support congregational work. There is no reason to doubt that this vision helped pave the way for the establishment of a theological seminary in Estonia.

The Baptist Seminary before the Second World War

Before 1940, Baptists were the only free church in Estonia to offer education at the seminary level. However, the establishment of a theological school had a broader background. In 1920, a pioneering conference took place in London with Baptist delegates from Britain, North America, and other countries. It was decided that in the aftermath

¹⁰ Short courses were organised in later years also; for example, in 1929–1930 a Bible course, in 1935 a training for preachers and other spiritual co-workers, and in 1936 a training for Sunday School teachers and choir conductors.

¹¹ *Festschrift für Feier des 50. Jährigen Jubiläums des Predigerseminars der Deutschen Baptisten zu Hamburg-Horn vom 1. bis 3. Juni 1930* (n. pub., n. d.), pp. 69–91.

¹² Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', pp. 177–178.

of the First World War context, not only humanitarian aid was needed but also support for founding theological seminaries in continental Europe.¹³ Concrete steps followed, including financial assistance, leading to the opening of seminaries in Spain, Romania, Latvia, and elsewhere. The Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary, in a country that only some years earlier had gained its independence, was opened with a festive worship service on 5 March 1922, in Keila. The sermon was delivered by Martin Schmidt, who called on listeners to make use of the newfound freedom in Estonia 'so that we might cover the land from end to end with the Word of God'. He urged prayer for God's grace upon the seminary and that all might be convinced, 'Yes, this school is needed!'¹⁴ Teaching began the very next day in a house belonging to Adam Podin, located next to the prayer house.¹⁵

The seminary committee had already been working — at varying intensity — since the summer of 1920 to prepare for the school's opening and to consider administrative and economic questions.¹⁶ Before the seminary was founded, Estonian Baptists had received the impetus for theological education mainly from Germany; now, the influence of Anglo-American Baptists increased.

The Baptist minister Adam Podin became the director of the newly established seminary. He had both international connections and the energy to organise school life.¹⁷ By nature, Podin was a preacher and organiser who could appeal to the hearts of sponsors. In 1923, speaking at the Baptist World Alliance Congress in Stockholm, he declared, 'In our seminary, we want to teach pure theology of Calvary, and we believe

¹³ Bernard Green, *Tomorrow's Man: A Biography of James Henry Rushbrooke* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1997), pp. 80–82.

¹⁴ Martin Schmidt, 'Jutustajate kool piibli ja kiriku ajaloo valgel' [Preachers' Bible School in the Light of the Bible and Church History], *Teekäija*, 6 (1922), pp. 82–83 (p. 83).

¹⁵ Before the Second World War, four cohorts studied at the seminary: the first from 1922 to 1925, the second from 1925 to 1929, the third from 1931 to 1935, and the fourth from 1937 to 1940. In the case of the final cohort, studies were left unfinished due to the school's closure by Soviet powers; however, Albert Tammo completed the curriculum in full, as he had previously attended as an external student.

¹⁶ Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminari Protokolliraamat, 1920–1940 [hereafter SP] [Minutes Book of the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary, 1920–1940], minutes no 1, 18 June 1920, EEKBLA.

¹⁷ See Pilli, 'Adam Podin', pp. 103–117.

that our school will become a powerful turning point in Estonia's political and religious life.¹⁸ His vision was ambitious, yet the seminary began modestly: it was necessary to develop a curriculum, define academic standards, find suitable teachers, and maintain contact with sponsors — mainly British and American Baptists. These were represented by James H. Rushbrooke and Walter O. Lewis, who visited Estonia repeatedly. According to the seminary's minutes book, during a visit to Tallinn in 1921, Rushbrooke emphasised that the seminary committee should not appoint teachers who might be eloquent speakers but lacked 'knowledge and education'.¹⁹ Faculty were expected to have university training — something that was very difficult to achieve for Baptists in Estonia at the time. Only Martin Schmidt met these criteria, having studied theology at the University of Königsberg.²⁰ In addition to Schmidt, teaching was carried out by Adam Podin, his wife Emilie Podin, and a few others.

Thanks to Podin's connections and initiative, steps were gradually taken to prepare teaching staff. In the 1920s and 30s, talented graduates were sent abroad for further study. At different times, Osvald Tärk and Evald Mänd studied at Newton Theological Institution near Boston. Tärk continued his studies in New York and earned a master's degree from Union Theological Seminary in 1929; Mänd completed a master's degree at Newton in 1935. Edgar Kilimit studied in England at Rawdon Baptist College, a well-known institution at the time. All of them later returned to Estonia and became seminary lecturers, with Tärk serving as director from 1938 onward.²¹ There were others who also studied abroad (Artur Proos for example) but those mentioned above became directly involved in the seminary's work. Mänd later earned a doctoral degree in exile after the Second World War. The seminary also supported Robert Võsu's further studies at the University of Tartu.²² Not all who studied abroad were seminary alumni; for instance, Tabea

¹⁸ *Third Baptist World Congress, Stockholm, July 21–27, 1923*, Records of Proceedings (London: Kingsgate Press, 1923), p. 109.

¹⁹ SP, minutes no 5, 15 November 1921, EEKBLA.

²⁰ Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', pp. 178–179.

²¹ Ruudi Leinus, ed., *Uskuge Jumalasse [Believe in God]* (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Liit, 1999), pp. 16–17; Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', p. 179.

²² SP, minutes no 72, 2 August 1937, EEKBLA.

Korjus studied at a mission school in England (1921–1924), and later she received a scholarship to attend the Teachers' College, Columbia University (1924–1925).

Lecture notes preserved in the Union of the ECB archives indicate that theological subjects were taught quite thoroughly. This became especially evident after 1931, when the seminary moved from Keila to Tallinn, was renamed the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary (officially in 1932), and continued its work in a building on Paldiski Road 46b.²³ Funds for purchasing the building were raised by Walter O. Lewis.²⁴ The new name reflected the reality that 'not all who graduate from the seminary are preachers'.²⁵ Other changes followed, including renewal of the teaching staff. Students were encouraged to complete secondary education alongside seminary studies, as many entrants had gaps in their prior education. The seminary library — partially preserved to this day — contains not only theological works but also secondary school textbooks, general educational literature, and fiction. All this was considered necessary for future Baptist leaders.

In some respects, the seminary's vision appears to have narrowed. In 1931, Karl Leopold Marley requested that members of the Evangelical Christian Free Church be allowed to study at the seminary, but the committee 'did not find it possible to grant this request'.²⁶ Perhaps, therefore, an opportunity to bring two movements closer together was missed. The selection of students also became more restricted. In 1922, four women were admitted alongside men; among them was Amalie Tamm, who had previously studied in Germany, and Marie Schnell, who was recommended by Adam Podin.²⁷ In 1925, four women were again admitted, including Klaara Truskan.²⁸ Although it

²³ SP, minutes no 46, 13 May 1931, EEKBLA.

²⁴ Osvald Tärk, 'Eesti baptisti usuteaduse seminar' [Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary], in *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, ed. by Richard Kaups (E. B. K. Liidu Kirjastus, 1934), pp. 180–184 (p. 184).

²⁵ SP, minutes no 54, 28 July 1932, EEKBLA.

²⁶ SP, minutes no 48, 23 July 1931, EEKBLA.

²⁷ SP, minutes no 8, 3 February 1922, EEKBLA.

²⁸ SP, minutes no 27, 29 June 1925, EEKBLA.

had initially been decided in 1922 that women might substitute Greek with handicrafts and exegesis with housekeeping,²⁹ they were soon granted full rights to study all subjects if they wished. ‘Brothers Lipstok and Podin decided that sisters — together with brothers — should take the full 4-years course, and all who wanted could participate in every class.’³⁰ In June 1926, the committee decided to invite two more women for seminary studies.³¹ Women experienced the same sense of calling as men, feeling a ‘strong inner compulsion to work in the Kingdom of God’, yet recognised too the need for study and preparation so that ‘God might use us as capable workers, ready to do whatever He commands’.³² However, in the 1930s, there were no women among the students. The explanation given was a lack of suitable facilities,³³ though this seems unconvincing — conditions in Keila had been far more modest than in Tallinn. With good will, this problem would certainly have been solved. It is more likely that the issue lay in prevailing attitudes.

At the same time, higher academic standards were set in the 1930s. Maintaining close contact with congregations was not always easy, and some criticism of the seminary emerged in the late 1920s.³⁴ Nevertheless, major tensions were avoided. Trust was strengthened when students visited congregations, participated in services, and preached. In 1938, upon becoming director, Osvald Tärk emphasised that the seminary was not merely an educational institution but should also cultivate prayer and moral virtues, and a willingness to serve God

²⁹ SP, minutes no 17, 12 September 1922, EEKBLA.

³⁰ SP, minutes no 28, 10 September 1925, EEKBLA.

³¹ SP, minutes no 30, 15 June 1926, EEKBLA.

³² ‘Õdede tööst Keila seminaaris’ [About the Work of Sisters in the Keila Seminary], *Teekäija*, 10 (1924), p. 154.

³³ Tärk, ‘Eesti baptisti usuteaduse seminar’, p. 184.

³⁴ Einike Pilli and Daily Valk, ‘Eesti EKB liidu haridustöö evangeliseerimise ja eluaegse õppimise dünaamikas’ [The Educational Work of the Estonian ECB Union in the Dynamics of Evangelism and Lifelong Learning], in *Teekond teisenevas ajas* [A Journey Through Changing Times], ed. by Toivo Pilli (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar: Tartu, 2005), pp. 51–88.

and fellow people.³⁵ He sought to combine academic credibility with piety and moral responsibility, both in his personal life and in the seminary.

In retrospect, discipline at the school may at times have been too strict. For example, Albert Tammo recalled that one student, Imant Ridaliste, was nearly expelled for composing a humorous, perhaps slightly ironic, verse. The pursuit of virtue also presented challenges: in the late 1930s, strict expectations were placed on students' behaviour and morality, yet when shipowners' meetings were held on the seminary premises with the participation of the school's leadership, the corridors reportedly smelled of tobacco smoke — something students perceived as hypocrisy — even if the Baptists themselves did not smoke.³⁶ Written records suggest that decisions were often made in committee meetings rather than through pastoral conversations or mentoring relationships with students.³⁷

The school also provided financial support for the students. In the first academic year, all students received free maintenance. Thereafter, free meals were granted to those whose 'Christian life was exemplary', whose academic progress was at least good, even if not

³⁵ Osvald Tärk, 'Meie ülesandeid ja ohtusi' [Our Tasks and Dangers], 15 September 1938. Notes of the speech at the inauguration service, Osvald Tärk materials, EEKBLA.

³⁶ Joosep Tammo, oral information, 18 January 2022. Albert Tammo was Joseph's father, and the information is based on Albert Tammo's memories. Albert Tammo was a former seminary student and later an ECB presbyter.

³⁷ The strictness that caused resistance among the students has been pointed out by Albert Tammo. For example, it was quite rigidly required that students must not be late for classes nor be absent. However, on Mondays, students often came from congregations where they had preached over the weekend, and transport conditions did not always allow them to reach Tallinn on time. The students expected more understanding from the school administration. Imant Ridaliste's humorous verse was inspired by a course in the history of religion taught by Evald Mänd. In his poem, Ridaliste included all sorts of names of gods that were mentioned during the course. Perhaps there was indeed a bit of youthful protest in the piece, but the school administration chose to deal with the matter administratively rather than pastorally. Ridaliste apparently acquired the reputation of a disobedient student, as he was reproached for absences and 'unacceptable' remarks during lessons. The school authorities disapproved of Ridaliste's plan to complete both the seminary and secondary school simultaneously, and then to study philology or medicine at the University of Tartu so that he could have additional income as a preacher. But perhaps this plan was actually sensible? Most Baptist preachers did in fact work in two roles, spiritual and secular. Tammo, oral information, 18 January 2022; SP, minutes no 88, 2 April 1940, EEKBLA.

excellent, and who actively participated in church work, by, for example, preaching at least two sermons per month. If academic performance declined, food costs were only partially covered. Students were also expected to keep a record of their service in congregations.³⁸ It seems that the seminary committee wanted to establish precise requirements, but life usually takes its own course, and when rules are pushed too much sometimes a favourable ground emerges not for virtues but for rule-based ethics. The requirements allowed for exceptions, which meant that in practice the seminary committee considered situations on a case-by-case basis. The students' daily schedule was quite structured. For example, in 1924 students had to be awake at 6 a.m. and lights-out was at 10 p.m. In between were prayers, classes, a lunch break, reading and the completion of home assignments.³⁹

In the long term, the seminary's work bore valuable fruit: it helped make spiritual ministry more reflective and gave Baptists a certain degree of social credibility. The seminary gradually moved toward a more academically robust education while remaining oriented toward the needs of local congregations and supporting evangelical work. Many graduates became church leaders or served in other roles, although limited financial resources meant that some took secular employment, for instance on the railways, for a stable income.⁴⁰ The seminary's development was disrupted by the Soviet occupation in 1940 which led to the closure of the school in the same summer. The seminary committee concluded that it was no longer economically possible to continue and advised students to find a job.⁴¹ The loss of foreign support was a consequence of political changes, and the closure itself resulted from the imposition of Soviet rule in the society. In August 1940, the building was nationalised.

As is often the case in education, the seminary's contribution to Estonian theological life and to the work of ECB congregations became evident only with some delay. Several graduates became influential

³⁸ SP, minutes no 70, 17 March 1937, EEKBLA.

³⁹ 'Õdede tööst', p. 154.

⁴⁰ Tammo, oral information, 18 January 2022.

⁴¹ SP, minutes no 89, 2 August 1941, EEKBLA.

figures in Estonian religious life. Osvald Tärk was both a pastor and theologian whose writings, though rooted in their time, have retained their relevance. Robert Võsu, who continued studies at the University of Tartu during the war, became a strong and stable leader in the ECB Union; his written legacy is also significant. He served as Senior Presbyterian (President in today's language) from 1970 to 1985. Many seminary graduates served congregations faithfully under the restrictive conditions of the Soviet period, including Albert Tammo, Rudolf Veevo, Imant Ridaliste, Kalju Raid, Osvald Tärk, Robert Võsu, and others. Their theological training supported their pastoral calling, providing a framework for self-development, ethical orientation, and the ability to carry out spiritual responsibilities under challenging circumstances in the Soviet atheistic context.

The Soviet Period and Theological Education

At the beginning of the Soviet era, the Union of Estonian ECB congregations sought to heal the wounds of war and adapt to new circumstances. Several leaders and seminary lecturers — such as Karl Kaups, Evald Mänd, and Leida Loo (Lund) — had fled abroad in 1944. The war and regime change also left deep marks on the students: theological studies were terminated, many emigrated, and at least one seminarian began to support the Soviet authorities. As formal theological education was stopped and the seminary closed, non-formal forms of learning became all the more important. Once again, the value of self-education came to the forefront.

Self-education had been significant for Estonian Baptists from early on, initially serving apologetic purposes. Early leaders, such as Jüri Mill, August Johansson, and Andres Tetermann learned German in order to read theological literature, and they built up substantial personal libraries. The study of Greek also helped them better understand the biblical text.⁴² Jüri Mill referred in his writings to pietistic Lutheran authors and to German Baptist literature. Through self-directed learning, the early Estonian Baptists clarified and defended their

⁴² Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', p. 174.

positions, and in the process, the identity of this movement became more clearly shaped and defined.

During the Soviet period, self-education again became important, and primarily served the aim of maintaining continuity with the seminary tradition and of strengthening pastoral work. A broad intellectual outlook was also useful in the potential debates within an increasingly atheistic culture. An example of lifelong learning was Robert Võsu, who followed developments in wider culture and in global Christian life, and shared information and ideas with colleagues. The pastor — or presbyter, as ministers were called in the Soviet setting — Arpad Arder represented a model of a free church intellectual: he knew many languages, had a wide intellectual horizon, and produced written works. His five-volume typewritten Bible dictionary, essentially a concordance, was a monumental undertaking.⁴³ Arder was also a popular preacher, known for engaging and narrative sermons. Besides words, he inspired others by his personality. Osvald Tärk was likewise known for continuous self-learning and extensive reading. The Union's leader Johannes Lipstok embodied a balanced theological wisdom until his death in 1961; his library, preserved now in the ECB archives in Tartu, consists mainly of German-language literature. Although self-study played a major role, it sometimes lacked the benefit of collective discussion and critical evaluation of ideas in the community of believers.

During times of pressure, efforts were made to organise more systematic, leadership-guided education. There was a need to equip new church workers. Probably there was hope that education would help to strengthen unity and doctrinal coherence within the Union. This was especially important after four free church groups were merged into one organisation in Estonia between 1945 and 1947, a process that was not as smooth as officially presented. The image of the pre-war seminary was sometimes idealised, and expectations for formal theological education could be overly optimistic: if only the seminary were restored, everything would be well! In reality, reopening the seminary was not possible. However, attempts were still made to promote education.

⁴³ Arpad Arder, *Piibli sõnaraamat* [Bible Dictionary], 5 volumes, typewritten manuscript (Rakvere, 1960).

During the time of Khrushchev's thaw, a short period of relaxation of ideological pressures, permission was sought to open theological correspondence courses, formally called, rather clumsily, 'The Examination Commission for Presbyters at the ECB Senior Presbyter's Office'. Verbal, although not written, approval for this project was granted by the Commissioner for Religious Affairs, and the courses operated from 1956 to 1960.⁴⁴

These theological correspondence courses began with a festive worship service 14 October 1956 in Oleviste Church, Tallinn.⁴⁵ Teaching took place at the Baptist church on Kalju Street. The examination commission (practically, the oversight committee) consisted of three members: Osvald Tärk, Oskar Olvik, and Robert Võsu. They served as the main lecturers, organisers, and authors of teaching materials. Over four years, together with Imant Ridaliste, they produced about thirty titles of compiled study materials. However, the way material was evaluated, put together, and presented, was the result of the work and ideas of the Estonian authors themselves. These typewritten A4-format texts — often over 100 pages each — were used for decades.⁴⁶ Tärk and Võsu continued writing, and their texts became more original, reflecting more clearly the authors' own theological views. In addition to training pastors and preachers, a music department was opened, which was essentially a choir directors' course led by Vardo Holm. One-third of the curriculum was theological, and two-thirds musical.⁴⁷ At the time, choir work — besides worship services — was almost the only permitted form of congregational activity, and the training also helped prepare organists who accompanied congregational singing on piano, organ, or harmonium.

⁴⁴ Toivo Pilli, *Usu värvid ja varjundid: Eesti vabakoguduste ajaloo ja identiteedist* [Colours and Shades of Faith: About the History and Identity of Estonian Free Churches] (Tallinn: Allika, 2007), pp. 90–124.

⁴⁵ EKB Vanempresbüteri juures asuva Presbüterite Katsekomisjoni protokolliraamat (hereafter PK) [The Minutes Book of the Examination Commission for Presbyters at the ECB Senior Presbyter's Office], minutes no 7, 1 November 1956, EEKBLA.

⁴⁶ Üllas Linder and Toivo Pilli, *Osaduses kasvanud. Kirjutisi Eesti EKB koguduste loost* [Grown in Fellowship: Writings from the History of Estonian ECB Churches] (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Koguduste Liit, 2009), pp. 232–233.

⁴⁷ PK, minutes no 2, 20 August 1956; no 5, 14 September 1956, EEKBLA.

One might question whether the requirements of these courses were too demanding. There was an attempt to maintain continuity with the pre-war seminary, and students were even called the ‘fifth cohort’ of the seminary.⁴⁸ Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to start from the problems faced by ministers and give theological interpretation to these situations. However, at that time, apparently no one was thinking about the method of problem-based learning. The learners found it difficult to keep up with the course requirements. Many of the participants earned a living for their families in other professions and carried out pastoral work as volunteers or for a small fee. This left them with little time for study. Certainly, the distance-learning courses developed theological thinking and provided a stronger foundation for pastoral work; they also fostered a sense of belonging and strengthened communication networks between participants. Yet, only one out of the forty managed to complete the full four-year programme. This was Paul Himma, the presbyter (or pastor in present language) of the Salem congregation in Tartu.⁴⁹ However, the courses certainly also played an encouraging role and promoted spiritual life. Ülo Meriloo notes in his memoirs that the heart, too, was cultivated.⁵⁰

The distance learning courses were closed in 1960 following an oral order from the Commissioner for Religious Affairs. Already a year earlier, the music department, which had operated for nearly two and a half years, from 1957 to 1959, had been forced to shut down. The atheist campaign of Khrushchev had begun. Nevertheless, the courses became legendary. Study materials reproduced by mimeograph could be found in almost every home of an ECB minister, but perhaps even more important was the awareness that theological education actually could be organised even during the Soviet times. This strengthened the identity of the ECB Union and encouraged the continuation of self-study. There was also another wider consequence: materials prepared

⁴⁸ ‘EKB usuteaduslikud kursused, 1956–1960’ [ECB Theological Distance Courses], typewritten collection (Tallinn, 1960).

⁴⁹ Uudo Rips, *Issanda aednik: Märkmeid Paul Himma elust* [Gardener of the Lord: Notes from the Life of Paul Himma] (Tartu: Salemi Baptisti Kogudus, 2000), p. 25.

⁵⁰ Ülo Meriloo, *Ränduri päevik* [A Traveller’s Diary] (Tallinn, 2001), p. 78; PK, minutes no 1, 7 August 1956, EEKBLA.

for the courses were translated into Russian, and the correspondence Bible courses that were opened in Moscow in 1968 took inspiration from what had been done in Estonia. The All-Union leadership of the ECB with their office in Moscow welcomed the contribution of Estonian lecturers, who were invited to teach in Moscow and from whom contributions were expected for the All-Union Russian-language ECB journal *Bratskii Vestnik* [Brotherly Herald]. Several Estonians — especially, but not exclusively, students sent from Russian-speaking congregations in Estonia — studied in these Moscow courses in the 1970s. Contacts were established with Baptists from other regions of the Soviet Union.⁵¹ The contribution of Estonians to the development of ECB theological education across the Soviet Union was significant, although educational standards in Estonia were likely somewhat higher.

In the 1960s, systematic theological training in the Estonian ECB Union came to a standstill, although experience and literature continued to be shared through personal relationships. When Robert Võsu became Senior Presbyter in 1970, the organisation of training once again came onto the agenda, even if only in a non-formal way. Võsu's method was to gather pastors and co-workers in different regions, give lectures, share information, and engage in spontaneous discussions. For example, in 1974 it was noted that study gatherings had taken place in five different locations and that interest in learning had increased.⁵² Notes by Uudo Rips from 1973 to 1981, reflecting the activities of a study group in South Estonia, have been preserved. Participants delivered short sermons and received feedback. Robert Võsu taught topics related to personal evangelism, which he himself had studied in depth. He also gave overviews of world religions statistics and the situation of Christianity in Europe. Based on these notes, it can be concluded that in the 1970s the gatherings initially took place in Tartu, while later Rips attended lectures in Tallinn.⁵³ Regional training days initiated by Robert Võsu took place over several years. Those interested

⁵¹ Ermo Jürma, email correspondence, 21 January 2022.

⁵² PN, minutes no 32, 17 September 1974, EEKBLA.

⁵³ Lõuna-Eesti piibliõppegrupi konspektid, 1973–1981 [Notes of the South Estonia Bible Study Group, 1973–1981]; Uudo Ripsi märkmed, 1973–1981 [Notes by Uudo Rips, 1973–1981], kaugõppekursused 1970–1980 [Distance-learning Courses 1970–1980], box 2.4.1, EEKBLA.

could validate their studies through examinations. Pastor Ermo Jürma recalls that in the late 1970s he took exams with Oskar Olvik and Osvald Tärk.⁵⁴

In 1983 and 1984, study group activity increased again. Alongside Võsu, teachers now included Joosep Tammo, Peeter Roosimaa, and Ermo Jürma, who all had received theological education in East Germany, and also Ants Rebane who had studied in Switzerland. The 1950s correspondence course materials remained in use, and suggested reading supported self-study. Examinations were often taken at the lecturers' home. In 1983, the correspondence courses organised in this manner were attended by 25 people in Tallinn, 15 in Tartu, 9 in Saaremaa, and 10 in Pärnu, as well as 9 additional students from various other locations. Surviving examination records show that students actively completed the initial examinations in Biblical Theology, Introduction to the New Testament, Introduction to the Old Testament, History of the People of Israel, and Exposition of the Book of Amos. After this, however, students' momentum appears to have declined, and subsequent examinations were taken less frequently and more irregularly. Those taking the examinations were primarily younger students in their twenties and thirties, many of whom were not ministers, but were still seeking their calling or wanted to grow in theological knowledge.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, many of them subsequently became pastors.

It is difficult to say whether the leaders of the ECB Union realised that it was challenging to sustain a curriculum that followed a structured sequence of subjects and required examinations, or whether they recognised the need to provide continuing education also for those who preferred a less systematic form of instruction. In any case, 'consultation days' were organised between 1981 and 1989. These were not primarily intended for students beginning in theology but rather for ministers and church workers, although no strict distinction was made. The consultation days had already begun in Tallinn during Robert Võsu's period of leadership and continued later while Ülo Meriloo

⁵⁴ Ermo Jürma, email correspondence, 21 January 2022.

⁵⁵ Kaugõppe kursuse hindend, 1983 [Grades of the Correspondence Courses, 1983], EEKBLA.

served as Senior Presbyter. Participants met almost every month except during the summer. Most of the teaching responsibility rested with Vösu himself, but a new generation of lecturers also emerged. In addition to the theologians educated in Germany, Jüri Puusaag should also be mentioned. Occasionally, foreign guest speakers participated, especially toward the end of the 1980s. The topics were designed to support participants in their spiritual ministry and to keep their thinking fresh. Lecture themes included biblical exposition, presentations on church life and theology, lectures on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, Christology, church history, ethics, and pastoral care. Practical guidance was also offered on preaching and the order of worship services and ordinances. In the early 1980s, Osvald Tärk delivered a series of lectures on the principles of the ECB Union as he understood them.⁵⁶

Throughout the Soviet period, despite restrictions, the ECB Union consistently sought ways to provide theological education. This included a deliberate effort to train future teachers of theology. Robert Vösu worked strategically to send younger students abroad for systematic studies. Tiit Niilo studied in Finland (1973–1974),⁵⁷ Ants Rebane studied in Switzerland (1978–1981) and later earned a Doctor of Ministry degree in the United States.⁵⁸ Particularly influential were Joosep Tammo and Ermo Jürma, who both went on to do a further one-year study course in Halle University, and Peeter Roosimaa, who studied at the Baptist seminary in Buckow (East Germany) from 1979 to 1982.⁵⁹ All three later played significant roles in shaping the Union's theology, educational efforts, and church life, and they became teachers when the seminary was reopened in 1989.

Vösu's long-term vision seems to be clear: to pave ways for offering systematic theological education. His commitment to education was especially notable given that no formal educational requirements were set for clergy in the ECB Union, even though theological training

⁵⁶ Konsultatsioonipäevade ettekannete lindistuste nimistu, 1981–1989 [Catalogue of Recordings of Consultation Day Lectures, 1981–1989], EEKBLa; see also Toivo Pilli, *Usu värvid ja varjundid*, pp. 70–76.

⁵⁷ PN, minutes no 25, 10 October 1973, EEKBLa.

⁵⁸ Ants Rebane, email correspondence, 22 August 2004.

⁵⁹ PN, minutes no 87, 12 May 1982, EEKBLa.

was valued. Every now and then the question about ‘minimum requirements’ emerged, but there is no evidence that anybody would have been rejected for ordination because of insufficient education.

There were also voices within the Union claiming that faith and zeal alone were sufficient, and that academic knowledge might hinder spiritual work. Võsu represented a balanced view: both prayer and knowledge are necessary; religious enthusiasm and learning must not be opposed to each other. As it turned out, his efforts laid the groundwork for the later development of free church theological education.

Friendship Groups as a Learning Context

A distinct phenomenon during the Soviet period was the theological learning that took place in friendship groups. This was not coordinated by the leadership of the Union but arose from the participants’ own initiative. One such learning environment was the Haraka Institute in Pärnu, which was essentially a circle of young people interested in theology and culture.⁶⁰ Theology was not studied there in the classical academic sense; rather, discussions centred on topics that were of immediate interest to the participants, giving rise to philosophical and theological excursions. When the church is marginalised within society and its institutional structures are weaker, personal relationships become all the more important. Since little has previously been written in Estonia about informal friendship groups as environments that facilitate learning, this article examines the subject in somewhat greater detail. It should also be noted that similar circles of friends and soulmates emerged elsewhere in Eastern Europe. They fostered independent thought and served as incubators for fresh ideas.

Joosep Tammo, when he was the youth leader in Pärnu Immanuel Baptist Church, had begun gathering young men interested in theology. This happened before he left to study in Germany in the late 1970s. The first meetings under the name Haraka Institute appears to have taken place in 1978 at Tammo’s home on Haraka Street

⁶⁰ Toivo Pilli, ‘Haraka instituut Tõrvas’ [Haraka Institute in Tõrva], *Teeekäija*, 3 (2017), p. 14.

(English: Magpie Street) in Pärnu, although similar gatherings go back to the beginning of 1970s. Contemporary recollections and notes confirm that the topics discussed ranged from cultural theory to practical theology and philosophical questions. In February 1979, participants delivered short sermons, which were subsequently analysed over several successive meetings.⁶¹ A few years later, on 2 August 1982, Joosep Tammo taught the structure of sermon composition, the use of illustrations, and language in preaching. He placed particular emphasis on evangelistic preaching, arguing that it should avoid moralising and coercion.⁶² It appears that during the second half of 1979, after Tammo had left to pursue his studies, the activities of the friendship group under the label 'Institute' subsided a little. This did not, however, mean that its members ceased to maintain contact. They continued to meet, for example at church on Sundays or while organising various activities together. When Tammo came back from Germany, new energy was poured into the activities of the friendship circle.

The Pärnu circle was primarily concerned with the relationship between Christianity and society, and between theology and culture. At one gathering, for example, a paper on atheism was presented. During the school holidays in August 1982, when Joosep Tammo was visiting Estonia from Germany, the Institute held its so-called 'summer session', or 'Culture Day'. In his presentation, the Estonian poet and preacher Albert Ruutsoo examined the problem of the debasement of life, which he described as 'mechanical civilisation'. Referring to Albert Camus, Ruutsoo observed that 'the end of a mechanically lived life is weariness'.⁶³ Toivo Pilli presented a paper on cultural issues in the Christian journal *Elukevad* (Spring of Youth), while Tõnu Lehtsaar's presentation, entitled 'Culture and the Human Person', dealt, among other things, with creative activity. Joosep Tammo's paper 'Culture and Christian Ethics', using the image of the Tower of Babel, argued that culture has a tendency to assume a function that causes fragmentations in human fellowships. Human beings, however, were created to live

⁶¹ Joosep Tammo, *Lectio*, Notes 1979 <<http://38698.edicypages.com/elu/markmeid-1979>> (accessed 16 January 2022).

⁶² Karl Pajusalu, Notes, Karl Pajusalu's personal archive.

⁶³ Albert Ruutsoo to Karl Pajusalu, personal letter, 10 August 1982.

‘within a community of fellowship’.⁶⁴ The Culture Day described above was a typical example of the Institute’s activities. Such round-table discussions usually brought together six or seven participants, occasionally more, and provided an opportunity for thoughtful discussions of theology, culture, and society.

This group also organised occasional excursions and residential retreats. Winter retreats were held in 1984 and 1985 at Kempri Farm in Tahkuranna, near Pärnu. The 1985 retreat focused on the doctrine of the Trinity. Participants prepared papers on the basis of the literature available to them and engaged in collective discussion of the issues raised. Toivo Pilli remembers reading a book in German, and preparing a presentation — unfortunately, the memory fails regarding the title of the book! A larger gathering took place in August of the same year at Tiit Johani’s farm in Holstre, not far from Viljandi. The unifying theme was ‘Bear Fruit in the Whole Truth!’, with passages from the Second Epistle of Peter serving as the guiding motif. Approximately thirty participants attended, a considerable number for the circumstances of the time. Recalling these retreats, Joosep Tammo remarked, ‘They were part of the Institute’s activities. They usually lasted for a couple of days.’⁶⁵

When Toivo Pilli and Karl Pajusalu began their studies at Tartu University in the early 1980s, they brought with them the model of fellowship and study that had developed in Pärnu. One of the members of the circle, Tõnu Lehtsaar, was already living in Tartu. In Tartu the group met in the side hall of the Kolgata Baptist Church as well as in private homes, including Pajusalu’s student flat. The interests remained wide-ranging. For example, participants discussed the ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who sought to reconcile Christian theology with evolutionary theory, introduced the theological thought of Paul Tillich, and explored Juri Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere.⁶⁶ Ants Rebane occasionally participated in the Tartu gatherings. In 1983, he gave an

⁶⁴ Karl Pajusalu, Notes, Karl Pajusalu’s personal archive.

⁶⁵ Toivo Pilli, ‘Sõpruskonna tähendusest’ [On the Significance of the Circle of Friends], n. d., manuscript, Toivo Pilli’s personal archive.

⁶⁶ Karl Pajusalu, Notes, Karl Pajusalu’s personal archive.

overview of developments in twentieth-century theological thought.⁶⁷ Tõnu Lehtsaar presented several papers on communication and psychology, such as one in 1985 explaining the dynamics of the psychotic group.⁶⁸

Whereas the Institute in Pärnu consisted primarily of young men, with occasional exceptions, the Tartu circle more often included young women with an interest in culture and theology. In Tartu, the boundaries between the Institute's activities and other forms of cultural life were more fluid. Poetry evenings and meetings with interesting individuals, for example, contributed to this group's intellectual vitality. The influence of the same circle was evident in these events, and many of the participants were the same. Theological discussion groups continued in Tartu during the second half of the 1980s. According to Ermo Jürma, a meeting featuring presentations was held at the home of Valdeko Säre in February 1987, attended also by Tarmo Toom and Tarmo Uustalu from Tallinn.⁶⁹ Friendship and a shared interest in theology fostered connections between participants in different towns.

A fellowship of individuals in Tallinn, from Evangelical Christian and Baptist backgrounds and with an interest in theology, also convened for discussions. The activities of the Haraka Institute, whether in its Pärnu or Tartu manifestations, likely served as a model, becoming known through personal networks. As illustrative of these activities, in October 1983 a discussion circle took place in Tallinn at which Peeter Roosimaa presented a paper on the links between Christianity and the Industrial Revolution; Tarmo Toom examined the relationship between music and Christian worship; Toivo Pilli addressed cultural issues in the history of Estonian Free Churches; and Joosep Tammo delivered a presentation entitled 'Culture Reborn in Christ'.⁷⁰ In January 1987, another discussion group met in Tallinn under the name the Areopagus Club. Once again, the relationship between Christianity and culture formed the central theme, under the title 'The Sociodynamics of

⁶⁷ Toivo Pilli, Notes, Toivo Pilli materials, Haraka Institute and study days, box 6, EEKBLA.

⁶⁸ Tõnu Lehtsaar, 'Psühhoiline grupp' [A Psychotic Group], manuscript (n. d.), Karl Pajusalu's personal archive.

⁶⁹ Ermo Jürma, email communication, 18 January, 2022.

⁷⁰ Invitation to the discussion circle, 29 January 1983, Karl Pajusalu's personal archive.

Culture, or On the Physiology of an Idol'. The main paper was presented by Joosep Tammo, and the model he proposed gave rise to a lively debate. Seven participants attended, including Jaan Bärenson, Ingmar Kurg, and Tõnu Lehtsaar.

These informal circles of friends created networks of interpersonal relationships that fostered trust and established a foundation for the exchange of ideas and mutual learning. These meetings also represented a form of intellectual formation distinct both from individual self-study and from the courses organised by the leadership of the ECB Union. The significance of such networks extended beyond the acquisition of knowledge: they also gave rise to enduring personal friendships and mentoring relationships. Joosep Tammo identifies a further dimension: 'The idea of establishing some kind of intellectual club represented, in a sense, a deliberate response to a more emotionally oriented form of religiosity. We thought that if it created relationships and expanded, it would also acquire a missional dimension.'⁷¹ Initiatives such as the Haraka Institute also inspired another important activity: the production and circulation of typewritten 'journals' or, rather, collections of articles.

The most significant collection, or periodical, to reach a wider readership was *Lectio*, edited and published by Joosep Tammo. Between 1977 and 1979, at least ten typewritten issues appeared. Participants in the Haraka Institute formed part of *Lectio's* readership, while also contributing ideas and material of their own.⁷² Some articles were translated from the Russian-language journal *Logos*, published in Belgium for readers in the Soviet Union. *Logos* was a Catholic periodical containing both devotional material and intellectually demanding theological and cultural essays. In Estonia it circulated through a Lutheran pastor Tiit Salumäe, and Tammo adopted it as the principal model for his own publication.⁷³ Naturally, the so-to-speak hand-produced *Lectio* had its limitations. It was typewritten, occasionally

⁷¹ Toivo Pilli, 'Sõpruskonna tähendusest', Toivo Pilli's personal archive.

⁷² Timoteos Pilli, 'Teoloogilise ajakirja *Lectio* lugu' [The Story of the Theological Journal *Lectio*], (unpublished research paper, Hugo Treffner Secondary School, Tartu, 2019), p. 25.

⁷³ Timoteos Pilli, 'The Story of the Theological Journal *Lectio*', p. 13.

contained typographical errors, and some duplicated copies were faint and difficult to read. Nevertheless, this publication challenged its readers intellectually and broadened their horizons of knowledge, particularly within the intellectually stagnant and officially atheist society of the late Soviet period. No doubt, it also widened the theological discussion in the free church setting in Estonia.

Inspired indirectly by both the Haraka Institute and *Lectio*, Pilli and Pajusalu published three issues of the cultural journal *Jäljed* (Footprints) between 1979 and 1980, exploring cultural themes from a Christian perspective. These issues included, for example, reflections prompted by a concert by pianist Rein Rannap, a selection of poems, discussions of the theatre productions ‘Waiting for Godot’ and ‘The Makarenko Colony’, and an introduction to Mother Teresa following her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. Subsequently, in 1987–1988, Pilli edited two issues of *Lugemisvihik* (Reading Notebook), a publication reflecting a more traditionally free church theological orientation.⁷⁴ Between 1981 and 1988, Ingmar Kurg edited *Logos*, a journal that appeared six times annually.

All of these publications were produced in typewritten form, and the number of copies were very limited — certainly less than a hundred. Compared with the publications discussed above, Kurg’s *Logos* functioned more explicitly as the voice of the official interests of the ECB Union.⁷⁵ It followed established patterns, was primarily intended for the denomination’s presbyters (pastors), and enjoyed the support of Robert Võsu, the Senior Presbyter of the Union, who regarded the journal as an important instrument of leadership and ministerial work. By contrast, *Lectio*, *Jäljed*, and *Lugemisvihik* reflected a more ecumenical outlook. They welcomed a broader range of contributions, engaged with questions of general culture, and created an intellectual space that encouraged creativity and experimentation with new ideas. Both the activities of these circles of friends and the typewritten journals they produced embodied a measured form of protest against intellectual

⁷⁴ *Jäljed* I–III; *Lugemisvihik* I–II, EEKBLA.

⁷⁵ It is not clear if the title of this Estonian typewritten journal was or was not inspired by the Belgian publication *Logos*.

complacency and stagnation in both church and society, while deliberately avoiding overt criticism.

The Communist state kept these activities under close observation but did not prohibit them outright. It is possible that the system of control, represented by the Commissioner for Religious Affairs, tolerated gatherings, study days, and the limited circulation of typewritten materials, provided that they did not address overtly political issues. Robert Võsu, as Senior Presbyterian, may also have succeeded in establishing a *modus vivendi* in his dealings with the authorities. Joosep Tammo has suggested that the atheist regime was particularly concerned by the charismatic revival that took place at Oleviste Church during the 1970s and 1980s, as it proved difficult to control. In discussions with the Commissioner, Võsu may therefore have argued that educational initiatives were necessary to maintain balance within church life.⁷⁶ This interpretation, however, remains speculative.

Summary and Conclusions

Estonian Baptists and the ECB congregations, particularly their leaders, attached considerable importance to theological education. During the formative years of the Baptist movement, preachers and leaders regarded theological learning as an apologetic resource. They studied German-language theological literature and even examined the New Testament texts in the original language. This strengthened their religious identity. Consistent with Baptist tradition, questions concerning religious practice and Biblical interpretation were discussed at conferences held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attended by representatives of local churches. Approximately a dozen preachers, including influential figures like Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok, and August Johannson, received theological training at the Baptist seminary in Hamburg. The experience acquired abroad, together with locally organised short courses for ministers, laid the foundation for the establishment of a theological seminary in Estonia. The need for

⁷⁶ Toivo Pilli, 'Sõpruskonna tähendusest', Toivo Pilli's personal archive.

a more systematic programme of theological education developed gradually over time.

The Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary was established in Keila in 1922 under the leadership of Adam Podin, with substantial support from international partners. Its primary purpose was to prepare ministers for service in local congregations, equipping them with the skills required for Biblical interpretation and the effective communication of the Christian message. In 1931, the seminary relocated to a new building in Tallinn, and soon adopted the name Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary. Several young lecturers who had received theological education abroad, including Osvald Tärk, Evald Mänd, and Edgar Kilimit, introduced more ambitious theological and academic objectives. These developments were, however, brought to an abrupt end by political change, as the seminary was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1940.

The educational efforts undertaken before the Second World War were nevertheless far from futile. The fruits of the seminary's work became evident during the Soviet period, when many of its graduates served their congregations with dedication, applying in the Communist context the theological insights and practical ministerial skills they had acquired through their pre-war training. The pre-war seminary came to assume an almost symbolic status — perhaps somewhat idealised, yet serving as an important reminder of the significance of theological education for Christian ministry in general, and for Baptist work in particular. Former students continued to meet during the Soviet era,⁷⁷ while the seminary's documents and library were secretly preserved in the attic of the Kohila Baptist Church. This investment in theological education enabled the ECB Union to maintain institutional stability and pursue its mission with purpose even under the challenging conditions of an officially atheistic regime.

During the Soviet period, it was impossible to re-establish the seminary. Instead, efforts were made to compensate for its absence through short-term training courses and theological distance-learning

⁷⁷ For example, a reunion of the pre-war seminary students to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the school was organised in 1972.

programmes. These initiatives were intended to prepare new ministers and church workers while also strengthening unity within the Estonian ECB Union, into which the Soviet authorities had merged four previously independent free church denominations. Independent study was actively encouraged.

In a surprising and exceptional development, the ECB Union received oral permission from the Soviet authorities to organise theological distance-learning courses between 1956 and 1960. For a period of two years, additional training was also provided for organists and choir directors. The academic requirements of the programme may have been overly demanding, reflecting an attempt to emulate the objectives of the pre-war seminary. Nevertheless, those who participated acquired valuable theological knowledge and practical skills, while also forming personal relationships that proved beneficial in their ministerial service. The lecturers produced nearly thirty typewritten study manuals and prepared lecture notes. Although these were largely compilations, they constituted an important body of teaching and learning material that provided a foundation for the theological education of the next generation. On the basis of these texts, beginning students in the 1970s and 1980s undertook non-formal examinations administered by more experienced ministers.

Some of these materials were translated into Russian, thereby supporting the correspondence Bible courses established by the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Moscow in 1968. Robert Võsu and Osvald Tärk, who taught on these Moscow courses, drew extensively upon both the experience and the teaching materials of the pre-war seminary and the theological courses of the 1950s. In retrospect, the preservation of theological education within the Estonian ECB Union, despite the severe constraints imposed by the Soviet regime, proved to have a far greater long-term significance than might initially have been anticipated.

During the 1970s, the Senior Presbyter Robert Võsu organised regional study groups for ministers and other church workers. These training sessions enabled him to identify and encourage new workers for service in local congregations. At the same time, the study gatherings

provided valuable encouragement and support to those already engaged in ministry. Võsu's energy and determination in organising training initiatives and promoting theological education were remarkable. By 1983, the various study groups comprised approximately 60–70 participants, the majority of whom completed four or five examinations within the following two years. Thereafter, however, the number of candidates taking examinations declined significantly. It appears that the demands of sustained theological study, particularly through independent reading, were difficult to reconcile with the responsibilities of everyday life and ministry.

A less demanding, yet highly effective, form of continuing ministerial education was provided through the consultation days held in Tallinn between 1981 and 1989. These gatherings featured lectures on a wide range of subjects, at times addressing issues of contemporary relevance. They also brought together ministers and lay church workers from different congregations, fostering a sense of unity and providing opportunities for discussion and the exchange of ideas. Another significant contribution of Robert Võsu was his crucial role in enabling some young theologians and preachers to undertake formal theological studies abroad during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Later, these theologians and pastors contributed to the life of ECB Union for decades.

The present article pays particular attention to friendship networks that facilitated informal theological education. One such network was the Haraka Institute, an informal friendship circle that started in Pärnu, a seaside resort town, in 1978. Its meetings featured presentations and discussions that broadened participants' intellectual horizons, fostered an ecumenical understanding of theology, explored the relationship between Christianity and culture, and provided opportunities to practise preaching. This form of theological education was neither coordinated by the leadership of the ECB Union nor intended to follow a prescribed curriculum. Consequently, it allowed for a greater degree of spontaneity and intellectual creativity. Similar friendship networks of individuals interested in theology subsequently emerged in Tartu and Tallinn. The network was further strengthened,

and its ideas disseminated, through the typewritten journal *Lectio*, edited and published by Joosep Tammo between 1977 and 1979. *Lectio* also served as a model for some subsequent publications, as short-lived as they were. Although the circulation of these typewritten texts was necessarily limited, their readership extended beyond the members of the friendship network itself. These collections articulated ideas that went beyond the themes typically addressed within the Estonian Free Church tradition.

And finally, theological education took various forms in Estonian ECB life. It could take place through individual study or within discussion groups, following either a structured programme or the spontaneous interests of the participants. Theological education constituted an important element of the ECB Union's identity. The provision of ministerial education, combined with religious commitment, served as a means of building up congregations, offering necessary tools for pastors and preachers, and equipping them to respond to changing circumstances. It also contributed to identifying and preparing new church workers for ministry. Keeping theological education alive even during atheistic times prepared opportunities for re-opening the theological seminary in 1989 when the society opened up for religious and political freedoms.

Book Reviews

David P. Gushee and Paul Silas Peterson (eds), *Christianity and Democracy Today: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2025), 152 pages. ISBN: 9781032965765.

Reviewed by Daniel Hutton

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The editors, David P. Gushee and Paul Silas Peterson, bring substantial expertise to this volume, and their long-standing work in Christian ethics, public theology, and the study of religion and politics positions the book as a significant contribution to the current debate on the evolving relationship between democracy and religion around the globe. The editors curate a collection of scholarship that engages both the historical nuance and contemporary urgency of democracy, framing the conversation in ways that are accessible to scholars, practitioners, and students of Christianity. In an era marked by democratic fragility, resurgent nationalism, and contested visions of religious freedom, the combined experience of both editors and authors contained in this text lends the volume a depth that makes it a valuable resource for those seeking to think carefully about Christianity's public role.

One of the notable strengths of the book is the way it illuminates the complex and mixed record of Christianity's entanglement with democratic projects across different regions and periods. Rather than offering a simplistic story of Christianity as either the guardian or the enemy of democracy, the essays draw attention to the ambivalence, tensions, and mixed motivations and results that have characterised this relationship. The volume foregrounds how theological commitments, ecclesial structures, and socio-political contexts have variously created lasting foundations and unstable bases for democratic norms. Attesting to the diverse lived experiences of faith communities' participation in

democratic processes, the book resists universal solutions to localised situations regarding the possibility of faith strengthening democratic traditions. Instead, it invites readers into a more focused and historically informed engagement with the theme.

A further contribution of the book lies in its sensitivity to the varied historical trajectories through which ideas of Christianity and democracy have developed, particularly in both colonial and emerging contexts. The chapters show how these concepts are not abstract ideals floating above history, but, instead, they are realities that have existed within concrete situations of power, resistance, and cultural negotiation. Attention to colonial legacies, postcolonial aspirations, and the dynamics of emerging democracies allows the volume to present multiple perspectives on how Christian faith intersects with struggles for representation, participation, and human dignity. This multiplicity of voices asserts the important claim that there is no single model, struggle, or solution for 'Christian democracy'. It is, rather, a range of contextual experiments that arise from a myriad of different social and historical experiences.

Taken as whole, the varied angles in this volume offer rich insight into how democratic life might grow, endure, and bring genuine benefit within very different global communities. Precisely for this reason, however, it is regrettable that voices from the Arabic-speaking world, whether from the Middle East or North Africa, are largely absent from the conversation. Given the diversity of governance and experiences of democratic traditions in these regions, and the long historical presence of Christian communities there, this omission leaves a notable gap at a point where questions of democracy and faith are especially acute. A more sustained engagement with these contexts would have further strengthened the volume's claim to present a truly global account of Christianity and democracy. However, even with this critique, the book presents readers a great opportunity to explore the current state of Christianity and democracy from a global perspective, strengthening opportunity for understanding, dialogue, and action.

Nicholas Norman-Krause, *Political Theology and the Conflicts of Democracy*. New Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 361 pages. ISBN: 9781009603843.

Reviewed by Christopher Schelin

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In this book, Nicholas Norman-Krause offers an intervention into both radical democratic theory and Christian political theology to resolve a central issue: namely, the relationship between political community and pluralistic difference. These dimensions of social existence are commonly understood as opposed to one another, catalysing either illiberal and postliberal projects of homogenisation or liberal efforts to manage diversity through individualistic tolerance and a public discourse reduced to an alleged ‘neutral’ rationality.

The author endorses the convictions of radical democracy, also known as agonistic political theory, that difference and its resulting conflicts are not just ineliminable but are productive aspects of democratic practice and human flourishing. But Christian theology tends toward interpreting contestation as a consequence of sin and has, like political liberalism, sought to restrict or contain it. Norman-Krause thus sets out to develop a ‘theory of conflict’ for democratic political theology (p. 13). He joins a growing body of work on the interface of theology and radical democracy, although his text demonstrates little awareness of the existing literature apart from radical political theology, which rejects notions of divine sovereignty and transcendence.

The argument begins with two mostly descriptive chapters that introduce prominent political theologies and their accounts of difference, followed by an outline of agonistic theory. The former details two strands of the Augustinian tradition: a postliberal trajectory as exemplified primarily by John Milbank and the civic liberalism of Eric

Gregory and Charles Mathewes. The latter chapter focuses on the ontological grounding for constructive agonism in the writings of William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe.

Theorising democratic conflict begins quite rightly with a political-theological anthropology that recognises disagreement is borne of our creatureliness as defined by finitude, contingency, and embodiment. ‘Ordinary’ conflict occurs in the day-to-day negotiation of competing goods, calling forth practical reason. Norman-Krause then argues for a dynamic understanding of community as constituted by practices of making and contesting shared judgements. Finally, he returns to the Augustinian tradition to centre agonistic political theology in love, elaborating Augustine’s concepts of friendship and admonition and then Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King Jr’s understanding of enemy-love as an invitation to moral and political conversion.

Norman-Krause provides a robust argument for embracing the central claim of agonistic theory that conflict is not only basic to human nature but that it can and must be wielded as a positive good for attaining and revisioning political agreements. Moreover, he has demonstrated that the Christian tradition contributes intrinsic intellectual resources to this effort. My quibble with the resulting theory of conflict is whether it is sufficiently theological. Norman-Krause effectively refutes trinitarian and other analogical arguments for normative political relationships, but I am not convinced that political theology should refuse any theoretical grounding ‘in claims about the nature of God’ (p. 143). He makes incidental references to kenotic Christology and divine judgement that transcends political judgement, but, ultimately, his agonistic political theology is so oriented to creatureliness that I expect it can be readily adapted to naturalistic theorising. Nevertheless, this is an essential read.

Russell P. Johnson, *Beyond Civility in Social Conflict: Dialogue, Critique and Religious Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 324 pages. ISBN: 9781009427173.

Reviewed by Nividi Kevichusa

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Russell P. Johnson presents a timely analysis of communication ethics amid pronounced political polarisation. In the face of the extremes of both antagonistic confrontation and superficial civility, he advocates a model of ‘constructive conflict’, in which critical communication facilitates the search for truth, accountability, and transformation.

Drawing on this foundation, Johnson criticises actions that avoid sincere communication or merely seek results, arguing that such approaches mainly benefit those in power. He responds by proposing a communication ethic focused on accountability and moral responsibility, encouraging people to reflect on their words and their impact on relationships and public communication.

Continuing this exploration, the first chapter describes three main ‘voices’ in communication: victory, civility, and open-mindedness. The ‘victory’ approach, as shown by Saul Alinsky, prioritises results over ethics and sometimes supports manipulation and the demonisation of others. ‘Civility’ focuses on politeness and democratic values, while ‘open-mindedness’, developed by Sally Miller Gearhart, sees persuasion as a form of pressure. Johnson says none of these approaches works well on their own, pointing out the struggle between staying ethical and being effective.

Johnson discusses non-violence, drawing on Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, and states, ‘It is not possible to achieve a non-violent society using violent means’ (p. 129). Non-violence is not simply a strategy, but also a way of communicating that shows respect, empathy, and moral consistency in standing up to injustice.

Building on communication practices, Johnson's discussion of Kierkegaard on 'illusion' and indirect communication stands out. He criticises abstract, impersonal speech, saying it does not bring real change. Instead, he supports 'concerned speech', which pays attention to context and how listeners receive the message. This idea is especially important for Christian communication, where at times, faith can become merely a cultural label rather than a way of life.

The last chapter concludes the book with a theological view of communication based on the 'Good News'. Johnson argues that the choice between compassion and confrontation is a false one, and instead suggests 'compassionate confrontation', which blends honest critique with love and reconciliation. Relying on Desmond Tutu's ideas, he expands this concept to include restoration for both victims and perpetrators. Johnson's core message is consistent with the kingdom paradox found in the teachings of Christ, where Christians are commended to love even our enemies. The message of communication is thereby not only about redemption, but about restorative justice for all, including our opponents.

While Johnson's emphasis on non-violence and love for one's adversaries may at first seem idealistic in contexts of deep injustice, his monograph offers a rigorous and provocative framework for critical 'Christian' communication. This book is timely and a much-needed message for Christians today who are divided globally along many lines, the political and theological chief among them. As such, the book's relevance extends to all who seek to participate in critical and ethical dialogue within today's highly polarised world.

Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *The Story of the Bristol Baptist College: Three Hundred Years of Ministerial Formation* (Pickwick Publications, 2022), 215 pages, ISBN: 9781532662515.

Reviewed by Gabriel Venturini de Souza

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Drawing on Anthony R. Cross's extensive research, this book narrates the three-hundred-year history of the Baptist College in Bristol, from 1720 until 2020 (although it covers essentially until 2006, with brief notes after that). It is said that the original material was quite detailed and academic, but, in this publication, there was an intention of making reading more easily accessible. This was successfully accomplished through Ruth Gouldbourne's work of condensing and transforming the original research into a more 'popular' style. The reader senses the emotional weight of this work, not only because of the content, but also because of the passing of Dr Cross in 2021. The book was dedicated to him, in honour of his work and research.

The book's structure follows the sequence of the story of the college, with three main chapters dedicated to each century of its existence. Rather than simply presenting a chronological list of events, the authors weave together multiple threads within each period. They begin by presenting the broader social and political landscape, showing how these situations influenced both the city of Bristol and the college's daily life. At the centre of each chapter lie the principals, particularly those with prolonged tenures, whose theological convictions, educational philosophies, and personal temperaments left lasting imprints on the institution. Yet the narrative extends beyond these leaders, offering glimpses into the lives of students, the contributions of tutors and professors, and the college's evolving relationships with the wider Baptist family and other academic institutions (especially Bristol University). Theological debates and social issues (such as slavery or the

impact of the two world wars) are covered with seriousness, although necessarily broadly. Spread between these chronological chapters are shorter thematic ones that trace themes transcending any single phase: the debates over ministerial education, the college's various physical homes, and the development of its library (which is the shortest one). This structure allows readers to appreciate both the sweep of history and the threads of continuity running through it.

The authors present the essence of the 'Bristol Tradition', with its continuous focus in forming 'able, evangelical, lively, zealous Ministers of the gospel', as well as a notion of 'catholicity' and a refusal of a narrow denominational position. While born from the life of one institution, this story transcends its immediate 'family'. For any reader engaged in Baptist life, the themes, debates, and enduring challenges mirrored in Bristol's journey will feel profoundly familiar. As an outsider to the college, this history fostered not just respect but a deep admiration for its enduring mission. This volume is more than a college history; it is a valuable case study in the very history of Baptist theological education itself, making this a vital and instructive read for the entire Baptist family.

Sergii Sannikov, *Signs of the Presence: Toward and Eastern European Baptist Sacramentalism* (Langham Global Library, 2025), 260 pages. ISBN: 9781786411655.

Reviewed by Toivo Pilli

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Sergii Sannikov is a prolific Ukrainian author, theologian, and pastor. He earned his doctorate from the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University and is the founder of Odessa Theological Seminary where he served as rector 1989–1997, after which he contributed significantly to the development of the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association. He has written in the field of Slavic Baptist history and theology and published several volumes in wider church history. He was the chief editor of the Slavic Bible Commentary, which appeared in 2016. While he is well-

acquainted with the Slavic Baptist story as a researcher and pastor, he combines both Western and Eastern European Baptist perspectives in the present book, entitled *Signs of the Presence: Toward and Eastern European Baptist Sacramentalism*.

It is rather unusual for an author from Eastern Europe to make an effort to use sacramental interpretation not only in analysing the theology of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but also when discussing the laying on of hands, preaching, music, and other elements of Christian practice and worship. One of the benefits of this volume is that it puts 'on the table' both Eastern and Western baptistic views and demonstrates the broad scope of the author's analytical interests. The book emphasises not only rational elements of faith but argues for engagement with the mystery of divine presence.

Sannikov finds sacramental thinking in an Eastern European setting that is often considered more symbol-oriented, or Zwinglian, if you like. Slavic Baptists have historically been shaped by their opposition to the churches that represent a sacramental understanding of God's presence, such as the Orthodox Church. Sannikov shows that, while in some sense true, this is not the full story. He states, 'In the broadest sense of the word, a sacrament is an event of encounter, in particular, an encounter between man and God through Jesus Christ' (p. 8). If a sacrament is seen in terms of communication and meeting with God, then a door opens for Baptists to engage with this approach. Sannikov outlines a more prominent place for material aspects that God uses for mediating his grace. A sacrament, according to Sannikov, 'stands as the inscrutable mediating presence of the sacred in the profane in a particular place and under specific conditions' (p. 9).

Sannikov's line of thought is well-argued, and he makes a credible and valuable contribution by exploring the possibilities of placing sacramental theology into an Eastern European context. It would be interesting to know to what extent Sannikov's theological views are reflected in the parishioners' convictions on the local church level. Of course, this will be another research project and book to be written in the future.

Leonid Mikhovich, *Traditional Worship in Russian-speaking Churches: Formation, Features, and Internal Conflicts with a Focus on Belarus* (Langham Academic, 2025), 363 pages. ISBN: 9781839736612.

Reviewed by Brian Talbot

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Leonid Mikhovich is an acute participant observer who is extremely well-placed to write this study of traditional worship services in Russian-speaking Baptist churches in Belarus. He was brought up within a committed Christian family attending regular services in this union of churches, and he subsequently has served in Christian ministry since 2002. He is currently the president of the Baptist Union of Belarus and rector of the Minsk Theological Seminary, Belarus.

The opening section of this lengthy detailed account of public worship explains the nature of the study and the methodology used to obtain the information utilised so effectively in this text, followed by an account of the important role played by public worship services in the Belarussian Baptist context. It was viewed by church attenders in times of persecution as a place of refuge and as a unique place for fellowship with other believers experiencing the same difficult times. The third chapter covers the history of Evangelical Churches in Belarus and the particular influences that shaped the distinctive patterns of worship services found in that country. The author, who leads worship services and preaches on a regular basis, is concerned that acts of public worship should be personally fulfilling and meaningful. However, it appears that in the twenty-first century an increasing number of churches, in the larger cities in Belarus in particular, are adopting newer patterns of worship under the influence of Western churches, without giving adequate reflection on the theological significance of these changes (pp. 4–5). Therefore, it is timely that this study of traditional forms of worship in Russian-speaking churches in Belarus has been written.

One chapter covers the religious influences, particularly from the Orthodox tradition, and the impact of persecution and suffering over decades in the last century. Examples of the context and

components of Baptist worship services are provided from selected churches. In order to give a clearer picture for the readers of what was taking place, the author provides rich detail not only of the act of worship but also in the use of space of the houses of prayer. Another chapter highlights theological emphases in these traditional worship services, prior to two final chapters that identify tensions in public worship and guidance for overcoming them.

This study is thoroughly researched with great attention to detail, allowing the reader to gain a clear picture of the patterns of worship found in these churches. It is written in a style that is easy to follow. It is not only groundbreaking original research, but it also fills a significant gap in scholarship on this subject. Hopefully, this book will encourage similar research projects in other countries. It is also reasonably priced and warmly commended.

Christopher B. Barnett, Clark J. Elliston, and Trevor B. Williams (eds), *Theological Discourses on Social Media* (Routledge, 2026), 246 pages. ISBN: 9781032436135.

Reviewed by R. Benjamin Potter

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In the acknowledgements section of this timely volume, the editors likened the process of assembling an anthology to ‘buying a puppy: it usually starts with casual conversation, initially seems like a great idea, and eventually leads to numerous sleepless nights’ (p. xiii). In this reviewer’s estimation, the sleepless nights have proven worthwhile. *Theological Discourses on Social Media* offers a series of reflections and analyses that seek to diagnose, analyse, and (in some cases) triage our vexing predicament of discussing theology through various social media outlets. The book’s contributors seek to interrogate various modes of theological discourse on the web and promote a way of thinking that attends to real challenges in a myriad of social media contexts. The result is a versatile and thought-provoking series of meditations that

encourage the reader to attune her or his senses to the challenges confronting serious theological engagement in our present moment.

Though it is a slender volume, *Theological Discourses on Social Media* is ambitious in its scope. The contributors discuss numerous social media platforms, connecting each with a theological concept, media theorist, philosopher, or other relevant point of contact. The book's structure lends itself to this task and is divided into three parts: Social Networks (Part I), Media Sharing (Part II), and Collaborative Knowledge and Virtual Reality (Part III). One of the book's shining moments occurs in Michael Burdett's opening essay, entitled, 'Attention Online: Christian Practice and Facebook Living'. Burdett intriguingly argues that incorporating contemplative spiritual practices such as 'fasting, lectio divina, and silence and solitude', to name a few, can offer Christians a path forward in theological discourse on Facebook. In a manner that is emblematic of the book's primary strengths, Burdett draws upon experts in the fields of technological ethics and media theory to demonstrate the manner in which Facebook has ceased to be fun and has, instead, become addictive (p. 9). He then persuasively challenges the reader to engage in an intentional spiritual 'counter-praxis' of spiritual disciplines (p. 15). The Internet, argues Burdett, 'is not essentially reprobate', and such counter praxis may grant Christians the privilege of 'transfiguring it for God's kingdom' (p. 16).

Not a page is wasted in the work, as each essay offers something different than the one preceding it. And, as is often the case in wide-ranging anthologies, its versatility is also a weakness. While the book's structure helpfully groups the essays into a sensible framework, some readers may wish for a more unified argument, or, at least, a common approach to discussing the relationship between theology and social media. However, in this reviewer's estimation, the trade-off is more than worth it, as the joy of making connections between the essays for oneself is its own gift. This book would be a welcome addition to the collection of academic theologians and theologically attuned laypersons alike. I highly recommend it.

Katherine Turpin, *Questioning Our Faith in Practice: Unlearning White Supremacy in Practical Theology* (Brill, 2025), 235 pages. ISBN: 9789004714243.

Reviewed by Marcus Tayloe

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There is an urgency that accompanies Katherine Turpin's writing throughout *Questioning Our Faith in Practice*. It is an urgency brought about by the proliferation of whiteness in Christianity. A proliferation so daunting that it even drives Turpin to wonder if the decreasing number of white Christians is not itself good news. Fortunately, Turpin is not consigned to despair despite the overwhelming problem, and she attempts to give us a picture of a redemptive practice of practical theology that fights against the constrictions of whiteness.

Turpin helpfully categorises whiteness as 'extractive, individualist, systematic/orderly/timely, hierarchical, patriarchal and heteronormative, supremacist, nationalist, and Christian' (p. 8). This definition frames the discussion throughout the book as she applies it to various areas of focus within practical theology. She subdivides the discipline into the categories of practice, education, intervention, leadership, congregations, apologetics, christocentrism, and anthropocentrism, which I found to be helpful as one not embedded within the field. Turpin's sharp criticism and deconstruction of these different areas, however, not only reveals the damage whiteness has done but equally illuminates our own participation within these systems.

The ethos of this book can be summarised through the practice of humility and repentance. Throughout, Turpin remains vulnerable not only to the power of whiteness but also to her own participation within it. She does not accuse others but insists upon her own guilt in proliferating the power of whiteness in practical theology. In doing so, she allows this book to be not merely an analysis of harmful trends but a repentant reflection that humbly admits to the violence perpetrated. It is due to this repentant and humble nature that this book is able to speak effectively to the problems that exist.

This book is of great value to white people engaging within the field of practical theology, because we need to constantly be engaged in reflection of our own participation in systems of whiteness. Katherine Turpin helps to open our eyes to these factors, yet appropriately recognises that her work is limited by her own status as a white individual. Therefore, if you pick up this book, understand that it is simply a launching point, and, as Turpin pleads, it should be ‘an invitation to read and re-read the work of our contemporaries of color in the field and to be inspired and transformed by their courage and insight’ (p. 214). This book is, nevertheless, a great place to begin, and, through critical engagement with its message, white practical theologians can develop the humble and repentant demeanour needed to work effectively within the field.