

Baptism, Postliberal and Anabaptist Theologies, and the Ambiguity of Christian Practice

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Abstract: Recent Anabaptist theology has been strongly influenced by postliberal theology, which tends to regard Christian practices as unambiguously distinguishing the church from the world. This tendency is evident in the baptismal theologies of Stanley Hauerwas and Frederick C. Bauerschmidt. Attention to the history of baptism suggests, however, that baptismal practice relates the church to the world in multiple ways. On this basis, and in dialogue with James McClendon's "baptist" theology, this paper contends that attempts to regulate Christian practices should attend to their ambiguities.

INTRODUCTION

Christian theology has experienced a "practice turn"¹ in recent decades. Instead of plumbing the logical depths of the creedal propositions or surveying the misty heights of universal religious experience, theologians have attended to concrete, embodied practices as constitutive and indicative of the character of Christian faith. Today a theologian is liable to answer the question "What makes a Christian Christian?" with a list of practices: a Christian has been baptized (and perhaps baptizes); preaches and teaches; prays; studies Scripture; partakes in communal worship and fellowship; receives the Lord's Supper; loves enemies; seeks justice, and so on. Although there is now some backlash to the practice turn,² a steady

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1. For this phrase see *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore Schatzki, Karen Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001).

2. The recent "analytical theology" movement could be regarded as part of this backlash. See, e.g., *Analytic Theology: Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

stream of books and articles continue to appear that, like this one, bear the language of practice in their titles.³

Within theological discourse, a major contributor to this practice turn has been postliberalism, which has even construed doctrine in practice terms. Postliberal theology is generally held to have emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, and its origins are strongly associated with Yale theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.⁴ Postliberals, and especially those following after Lindbeck, are known for adapting Ludwig Wittgenstein's late work on rule-based grammars and "forms of life" to the church.⁵ If practical grammars are the condition of a form of life's coherence, then grammatical clarification will contribute to the latter. Postliberals have taken up this insight by casting Christian doctrine as the practice of describing as clearly as possible the network of linguistic and other rules that make the church the church. For postliberals, doctrine, or Christian teaching, regulates the Christian life, and so makes it distinct and intelligible.⁶

Postliberal theology has made a significant impact in Anabaptist and Mennonite circles since the 1980s.⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, perhaps the best-known postliberal theologian, champions Anabaptism as closely aligned with his own understanding of the church and its practices. Hauerwas's Mennonite friend and major influence, John Howard Yoder, is sometimes discussed in studies of postliberalism,⁸ and the work of both has been formative for recent generations of Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians. James McClendon, Nancey Murphy, Harry Huebner, and,

3. For example, Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing the Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012).

4. For introduction, see James Fodor, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed., ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 229-248; Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2011). While some have announced postliberalism's "decline"—e.g., Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006)—others see it as "the regnant orthodoxy of the theological academy"—Christopher J. Ashley, "Liberation and Postliberalism," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 64, nos. 2-3 (2013), 118. My experience in the United Kingdom and the United States inclines me to view the latter judgment as closer to the truth.

5. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), esp. 79-90, 104-108. Probably the most comprehensive outworking of this view is Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vol. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

6. For analysis and critique of the postliberal understanding of Wittgenstein and rule-following, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 136-142.

7. I use the language of "Anabaptist and Mennonite" to include those who claim Anabaptist but not Mennonite identity, as well as those Mennonites who do not claim Anabaptist identity. I am indebted to Malinda Berry for this formulation.

8. E.g., Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 127-163.

more recently, Peter Dula, Chris Huebner, Alex Sider, Anthony Siegrist, and many others have articulated Anabaptist theologies through close conversation with postliberal sources.⁹ This alliance between Anabaptism and postliberalism recommends the latter as a subject of inquiry for Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians today.

In this essay I respond critically to postliberal accounts of practice by reviewing two baptismal theologies, those of Hauerwas and Catholic theologian Frederick C. Bauerschmidt. I focus especially on their contributions to the Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium that took place in 2001 and 2002. Bauerschmidt gave the keynote address, and Hauerwas provided one of the responses. From my perspective, their writings on baptism substantiate the charge levied by various critics—including sympathetic ones—that postliberals tend to construe Christian practices in unambiguous terms: practices and their effects can be known in advance without respect to their contexts, making them subject to comprehensive doctrinal regulation. This certainty that Christians are capable of *a priori* knowledge of practices makes postliberals susceptible to what political philosopher Romand Coles, writing about postliberal paragon Alastair MacIntyre, calls the “confidence trickster.”¹⁰ For Coles, MacIntyre’s overtures to discerning dialogue with different others are undermined by his confidence that his tradition and its constitutive narratives and practices are already well on their way to defeating those others.

The same can be said, I believe, about the postliberal baptismal theologies I outline here: although both Hauerwas and Bauerschmidt attempt to describe how baptism opens Christians to vulnerable interaction with “strangers,” their conviction that baptismal practice unambiguously distinguishes Christians from “the world” forecloses vulnerability. These postliberal theologians know in advance what baptism is and how it relates Christians to the world; any positive

9. James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); Nancy Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997); Harry J. Huebner, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2005); Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2006); J. Alexander Sider, *To See History Doxologically: History and Holiness in John Howard Yoder’s Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011); Anthony Siegrist, *Participating Witness: An Anabaptist Theology of Baptism and the Sacramental Character of the Church* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2013). Dula, Huebner, and Sider were Hauerwas’s Ph.D. students. These and other theologians have addressed some of the shortcomings of “classical” postliberalism in ways that inform my work here.

10. Coles, “MacIntyre and the Confidence Trickster of Rivalish Tradition,” *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 79-108.

interaction with the world simply reaffirms what the church already knows and does.

My response to this postliberal depiction of baptismal practice takes the form of a brief history of baptism from the New Testament to the Reformation. This historical narrative highlights the ambiguities surrounding baptism and how it relates Christians to the world. Since postliberal treatments of Christian tradition typically focus on theology and practice in the early church, Middle Ages, and Reformation, I have limited my review to these periods. Granting the postliberal claim that there is significant traditional material supporting an unambiguously “disjunctive” baptismal theology—in which baptism is said to disjoin church and world—I demonstrate that there is also significant material supporting a more ambiguous interpretation of baptismal practice, in which baptism is understood to relate Christians to the world in multiple ways, some of them positive or “conjunctive.” I conclude the essay by reflecting, in dialogue with James McClendon’s work,¹¹ on how the acknowledgement of practical ambiguity might lead to a more flexible and contextual mode of ecclesial regulation, one that in particular remains open to unexpected gifts from different others.

TWO POSTLIBERAL BAPTISMAL THEOLOGIES

Postliberal accounts of water baptism seek to describe how baptismal initiation regulates Christian identity by conferring Christian difference upon the initiate. This approach is seen clearly in the writings of Stanley Hauerwas. Although Hauerwas has not written on baptism at length in any one place, his many essays and books are littered with references to baptism—and precisely to baptism as inculcating difference. Since the present essay is not primarily about Hauerwas, I will limit my review to two occasions in which he writes on baptism. After looking at these I turn to examine the baptismal writings of one of Hauerwas’s students, Frederick C. Bauerschmidt.

11. McClendon is sometimes considered a postliberal—e.g., Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 93-94—and his alliance with Stanley Hauerwas and indebtedness to Wittgenstein, Frei, Lindbeck, and MacIntyre would certainly seem to justify that identification. McClendon used the term “postmodern” to describe his work, and others have called him a “postconservative.”—McClendon and Nancey Murphy, “Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies,” in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.*, vol. 2, ed. Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), 39-61; Roger Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007), 111-112. Regardless of the label, I hope to show that to an important extent he avoids the problems of the (other) postliberal theologians discussed here.

In Hauerwas's "primer in Christian ethics," *The Peaceable Kingdom*, he writes of baptism as one of the two sacramental "marks" of the church.¹² These marks, according to Hauerwas, are clear signs "through which we know that the church is church."¹³ In addition to the two sacraments (baptism and the eucharist), he includes prayer, preaching, and church discipline. Of the sacraments, he says that they "enact the story of Jesus and, thus, form a community in his image. We could not be the church without them."¹⁴ Through the sacraments Christians "learn who we are" and, "as we try to bring every aspect of our lives under their sway," they "set our standard."¹⁵ Baptism, specifically, "is that rite of initiation necessary for us to become part of Jesus's death and resurrection. Through baptism we do not simply learn the story, we become part of that story."¹⁶

In summary, the church is the form of life regulated by Jesus' story, and baptism is the regular means of coming under that regulatory regime. It should be said that Hauerwas does not see such regulation as erecting an impervious boundary between the church community and the rest of the world. With reference to church divisions, he suggests that "the church should learn to value her heretics. We never know what it is we should believe or be until we are reminded by another."¹⁷ He goes on to identify various things Christians must learn from Jews, in particular. Later, when discussing preaching, he says that the invitation to strangers "to share our story" must not lose sight of the fact that "the stranger also has a story to tell us."¹⁸ Whether a stranger rejects or accepts Jesus' story, Christians will "learn more fully to hear the story of God."¹⁹ Strangers help Christians avoid overly "conventionalized" representations of Jesus' story.

There is much to commend in this attempt to appreciate what Christians can learn from heretics, Jews, and strangers—from those outside the church's borders. At the same time, Hauerwas's use of the verb "remind" suggests that outsiders can tell Christians only what they should already know. Everything that Christians need to know, in other words, is already internal to the community and its regulatory framework. It is notable in this regard that, although Hauerwas wants to respect strangers' stories, the only story he seems to recognize is the story of their acceptance

12. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 108.

13. *Ibid.*, 107.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 108.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 107.

18. *Ibid.*, 109.

19. *Ibid.*

or rejection of Jesus' story. Strangers have no stories of their own that would enliven ecclesial conventions. Cross-border storytelling can only affirm those borders. Indeed, in baptism strangers submerge their stories within those told by Jesus, their lives disciplined and differentiated by the church in order to sustain what the church already is.

Possibly Hauerwas's most extended reflection on baptism is his positive response to Bauerschmidt's essay, "Baptism in the Diaspora."²⁰ Most of Hauerwas's short piece treats questions of infant baptism and the status of personal decision in baptism, but generally speaking his comments reinforce the presentation of baptism in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. For example, Hauerwas writes, "when the trip from the world to the church through baptism is not a very long one, then the question is not whether infants can be baptized but whether anyone can be."²¹ Baptism's legitimacy derives from the church being "rightly positioned vis-à-vis the world,"²² that is, distant and distinct from the world. Valid infant baptism is esteemed as a signal that Christians are ready for their children to die as martyrs and, though Christians should not seek persecution, "those kinds of considerations should never be forgotten."²³ The church should remember that its baptismal identity is so different from the world that the world will sometimes try to eliminate it by force.

The essay Hauerwas is responding to is also worth considering. Frederick C. Bauerschmidt is a Catholic theologian who did his Ph.D. under Hauerwas at Duke University. He published an essay on aesthetics in the groundbreaking *Radical Orthodoxy* reader, and the chapter on baptism in the strongly postliberal *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* edited by Hauerwas and Sam Wells.²⁴ In the latter, his main concern is to argue against abortion on the basis that baptism assimilates bodies into a community wherein they are given the "powers of self-donation."²⁵ Since baptized bodies are self-donating, and not primarily self-controlled or self-contained, baptized Christians are free to welcome the unborn as

20. Hauerwas, "Response by Stanley Hauerwas, 21 September 2001," in *On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium, 2001-2002*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2004), 101-103. Hauerwas calls Bauerschmidt's essay "terrific" (101). See, in the same volume, Bauerschmidt, "Baptism in the Diaspora," 16-61.

21. *Ibid.*, 102. Cf. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 97, for relevant critique of ecclesiologies that rely on discourses of spatial distance between church and world.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 102-103.

24. Bauerschmidt, "Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 201-219; Bauerschmidt, "Being Baptized: Bodies and Abortion," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 250-262.

25. Bauerschmidt, "Being Baptized," 252.

“needy neighbors”; in doing so they “most vibrantly replicate God’s baptismal welcome of [themselves].”²⁶ True to postliberal form, Bauerschmidt distinguishes his perspective from liberal rights-based approaches to abortion, in which atomic individualism is purportedly regulative. His essay “Baptism in the Diaspora” develops similar themes.

The “diaspora” in question refers to Bauerschmidt’s description of the post-Christendom setting in which “the church can no longer presume that the surrounding culture will form people as Christians.”²⁷ Eschewing nostalgia as well as celebration of Christendom’s demise, Bauerschmidt accepts that diaspora “simply *is*, according to the providence of God.”²⁸ Once diaspora is acknowledged, he says, the church can face the task of doing something about it. With regard to the topic at hand, the church can seek to baptize well.

For Bauerschmidt, good baptism is rooted in “the fundamental thesis of any post-constantinian ecclesiology,” namely the thesis that “the church is a visibly distinctive social order that is set apart from the world to be the instrument of the world’s salvation.”²⁹ Insisting on the church’s visible distinctiveness and separateness from the world enables Christians, according to Bauerschmidt, to avoid reductive ecclesiologies that see the church as either one among many expressions of human religiosity or as an isolated “ark” on which the saved pass unharmed through this earthly vale.³⁰ Instead, Bauerschmidt’s post-Constantinian interpretation holds up the church as “a ‘social order,’” “a distinctive way of human beings living together that stands over and against other social orders.”³¹ As a visible community, the church by God’s power makes manifest God’s kingdom in and to the world.³²

Bauerschmidt makes an Augustinian case that the sacraments are specific rituals through which God moves to draw humans into God’s purposes. Baptism in particular shows that God’s gracious reorientation of human being toward communal discipleship has elements both of “radical reversal” and gradual becoming.³³ Regardless, the goal is the

26. *Ibid.*, 261.

27. Bauerschmidt, “Baptism in the Diaspora,” 47.

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

29. *Ibid.*, 34.

30. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

31. *Ibid.*, 35.

32. *Ibid.*, 35-38.

33. *Ibid.*, 38-45. Bauerschmidt views “radical reversal” imagery as having roots in Pauline theology (especially Romans 6) and process imagery as stemming from Johannine “new birth” theology (especially John 3). Alan Kreider is surely right that “Nicodemus . . . would have been astonished by this reading.” See “Response by Alan Kreider, 6 August 2001,” in

same given the fundamental ecclesiological thesis that regulates Bauerschmidt's interpretation of baptism's "meaning." Baptism initiates believers into ecclesial difference and distance.

In spite of his strong accent on baptism's differentiating function, it should be clear that Bauerschmidt, like Hauerwas, intends to avoid construing ecclesial borders as cutting the baptized off entirely from "the world." Nevertheless, and also like Hauerwas, the extent to which he is successful is debatable. We have seen that he rejects an ark ecclesiology, and that he envisions distinction as a necessary condition of Christian witness. The church is, somehow, impressively visible to "the world" across the great distance that separates them.

Moreover, Bauerschmidt's Catholic sacramental theology acknowledges an intimate relationship between nature and grace, such that "grace is nothing less than the fulfillment and perfection of our human nature."³⁴ If this is so, then he ought to be able to name positive similarities between baptized persons and other persons.

Instead we read a litany of distinctions, as the unbaptized are reduced, in Augustinian fashion, to "the citizens of the earthly city—those who love themselves above all things" and are mired in "their self-seeking and lust for domination."³⁵ Only through baptism will they be able to escape to the church, which "makes visible on earth the kinds of relations that characterize . . . 'the heavenly city'—relations in which others are loved 'in God' and God is loved above all things."³⁶ Regulated as it is by a fundamental thesis of difference, the relation between heaven and earth, the church and the world, can only be disjunctive.

In Hauerwas and Bauerschmidt we meet two postliberal perspectives in which baptismal initiation is controlled by a theology oriented to Christian distinction from the world. Baptism, in this view, is the only legitimate passage from the world to the church, that which makes the world Christianly different. Persons, ideas, goods, practices—none may pass except through the transforming waters of baptism. Other postliberal baptismal theologies exhibit similar tendencies.³⁷ Judged on their own

On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium, 2001-2002, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2004), 80.

34. Bauerschmidt, "Baptism in the Diaspora," 40. See also his claim that "the church as a concrete assembly accords with human nature; so too the sacraments as visible rites unite the church in a way that is natural for human beings" (36-37).

35. *Ibid.*, 36.

36. *Ibid.*

37. See, for example, Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 126-174; Siegrist, *Participating Witness*. Also notable is Michael L. Budde, *The Borders of Baptism: Identities, Allegiances, and the Church* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2011). Although this book somewhat confusingly does not discuss

terms, these theologies certainly draw from major strands in Christian Scripture and tradition. But, to use Bauerschmidt's terms, it is possible to draw multiple meanings for baptism from Scripture and tradition.³⁸ I submit that there are untapped resources in both that would allow for a conjunctive interpretation of baptism, in which continuities between "church and world" are highlighted, an interpretation that would complement the postliberal disjunctive approach.

BAPTISM: DISJUNCTIVE AND CONJUNCTIVE

It must first be acknowledged that the grounds within the Christian tradition for affirming a disjunctive account of baptism are solid. At the end of the gospels of Mark and Matthew, the resurrected Jesus appears to his followers and commissions them to make disciples by preaching, teaching, and baptizing throughout the entire world (Mk. 16:15-16; Mt. 28:18-20). This emphasis on baptism as part of disciple-making is also evident in the Luke-Acts narrative, where baptism is portrayed as arising from John the Baptist's eschatological baptism of repentance.³⁹ After Jesus' ascension, his followers baptize new believers in his name (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 19:5; 22:16; cf. Mt. 28:19). The Pauline literature develops this theology of baptismal initiation into Jesus by depicting initiates as dying and being buried with Christ in baptism, that they might be resurrected with him (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12). Other New Testament passages relate baptism to the exodus sea crossing (1 Cor. 10:2), circumcision (Col. 2:11), a "washing" or "cleansing" (Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21), and a "new birth" (Jn. 3:5).

Moving into post-apostolic Christianity, the first treatise on the topic, Tertullian's *De Baptismo*, discusses the differences between angelically purified baptismal water and the "widowed waters" employed in "heathen" ceremonies.⁴⁰ Heretical "baptisms" are also discounted for being into a different Christ than that recognized by Tertullian's community, and Jewish washings for being daily, rather than once and for all.⁴¹ Tertullian further suggests that, although Jesus' first disciples may

baptism very much, its title is an indication of the extent to which baptism has come to be associated with a strong account of ecclesial borders.

38. Bauerschmidt, "Baptism in the Diaspora," 24.

39. Luke 3:1-22; Acts 1:5; 2:38; 11:16 *et passim*. See also Joel B. Green, "From John's Baptism to 'Baptism in the Name of the Lord Jesus': The Significance of Baptism in Luke-Acts," in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R.E.O. White*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 157-172.

40. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, trans. S. Thelwell, *Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume 3: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885), V, VIII-IX, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.vi.iii.i.html>.

41. *Ibid.*, V.

have been saved without baptism by virtue of their relationship with him, “the law of baptizing has been imposed” by Jesus’ post-resurrection command.⁴² Some scholars view the relaxation of these strongly disjunctive views of baptism as a sign of and contributor to the coming “Constantinian compromise” by which the church traded its distinctiveness for imperial power.⁴³

In pointing to other, more conjunctive strands of baptismal theology and history, my purpose is not to impugn or deny the disjunctive strands. My purpose, rather, is to contend that a complete account of ecclesial difference will also attend to likenesses between church and world and to ambiguities in which difference and likeness are not clearly discernable. My suspicion is that many differences are enriched when their existence is not viewed as antithetical to likeness or ambiguity; and that likeness and ambiguity can be held in generative tension with difference when the former are not viewed primarily as anomalies to be reined in and normalized by regulative regimes.⁴⁴ A church, furthermore, that embraces its multiple, often ambiguous relations to the world may find grounds for partnership and mutual learning with the world.

To make this case I offer a brief and selective history of baptism from the New Testament to the Reformation, highlighting the many ambiguities that have surrounded the ritual from its origins. I then turn to James McClendon’s work on baptism as a theological resource that may aid in interpreting this ambiguity. Recognizing baptismal ambiguity, I argue, will help Christians integrate conjunctive and disjunctive accounts of baptism.

BAPTISM: A HISTORY OF AMBIGUITY

In the New Testament there is evident uncertainty over the ecclesial status of those who had been baptized by John the Baptist. I have already noted that Luke-Acts portrays Christian baptism as arising from John’s baptism. Jesus, of course, accepts baptism by John (Lk. 3:1-22) and those Jewish authorities who refused to do the same are described as having “rejected God’s purposes for themselves” (7:30). Nevertheless, John had already introduced a distinction between his baptism in water and a coming baptism “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk. 3:16), a distinction

42. *Ibid.*, XII-XIII. Emphasis added.

43. Alan Krieder, “Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus’ Teaching in Early Christianity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72 (Jan. 1988), 5-30; David F. Wright, “Augustine and the Transformation of Baptism,” *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 68-88.

44. This approach may be given a logical foundation by Peirce’s concept of “vagueness,” as described by Gary Slater, *C. S. Peirce and the Nested Continua Model of Religious Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111-112, and Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 107.

Jesus reiterates after the resurrection (Acts 1:5). The Spirit comes at Pentecost (2:1-13), and Peter immediately preaches about Jesus and invites his audience to “repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). Reception of the Spirit is thereby concatenated with (water) baptism in Jesus’ name.

Orienting baptism around Jesus’ name and the gift of the Spirit represents a shift from John’s baptism, even if the latter is still esteemed by the early Christians. This combination of esteem and reorientation introduces an ambiguity as to the validity of John’s baptism. Although there seems to be no move to rebaptize in Jesus’ name all of those disciples who had received John’s baptism, that option presents itself as the church expands beyond its initial membership. In Acts 19 Paul is shown doing exactly that, as he baptizes in Jesus’ name a group of “disciples” who had only received John’s baptism (19:1-7).

We will see below that the proper understanding of this “rebaptism” became a major point of contention during the Reformation, but for now it can be taken at face value as indicating a surpassing of John’s baptism by Jesus’. However, this story is immediately preceded in the Acts narrative by the somewhat different story of Apollos. According to the author of Luke-Acts, Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew who “had been instructed in the Way of the Lord,” who “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus,” and who was filled with the Spirit,⁴⁵ even though “he knew only the baptism of John” (18:24-25). Traveling through Ephesus, he met some of Paul’s companions who “explained the Way of God to him more accurately” (18:26), but apparently did not require him to be rebaptized. Apollos was nonetheless welcomed by the fledgling church as a minister (18:27-28; cf. 1 Cor. 3:4-6).

As commentator Ben Witherington says, this episode is a reminder “that early Christianity did not immediately have a universally recognized and set approach to discipling people.”⁴⁶ There were, in other words, multiple passages into Christian fellowship alongside baptism in Jesus’ name. Accurate teaching about Jesus and, especially, the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s life⁴⁷ were also accepted as legitimate entry

45. The N.R.S.V. translates *zeōn tō pneumati* in 18:25 as Apollos’s “burning enthusiasm.” See F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 402, and Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 565, for arguments that this phrase should be interpreted as referring to Apollos’s fervency in the Spirit.

46. Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 565.

47. See the interesting case of Acts 10:44-48, where Gentile believers are filled with the Holy Spirit and then baptized.

points. Although John's Jewish baptism was not itself Christianizing, it did have positive, if ambiguous, value within Christian initiation. Apollos needed further instruction, presumably about Christian baptism given the story that follows, but did not himself need to be rebaptized. John's baptism at this point counts within Christian initiation in some ways, but not in others. Those who have received it and then come to faith in Jesus may or may not be rebaptized.

Even though water baptism did quickly become the universally recognized and set approach to Christian initiation,⁴⁸ not all Christians rushed to be baptized upon conversion or coming to mature faith. During the early centuries of Christianity infant baptism remained rare. Tertullian argued against early baptism, since baptism should only be received by those who may reasonably be expected to cease sinning.⁴⁹ Most Christians seem to have been baptized in their twenties.⁵⁰ As late as the fourth century, Augustine described begging his Christian mother for baptism when he faced a life-threatening illness as a young boy, but when the illness passed so did the impetus for baptism.⁵¹ He was only baptized much later, after many years of exploring "pagan" philosophies and lifestyles.⁵² Others seem to have remained in the church but delayed baptism as long as possible, so as to indulge in un-Christian behavior without fear of damnation.⁵³

The early church then seems to have included to some degree or another⁵⁴ unbaptized persons of various sorts: children, the pious who feared sinning after baptism, and the licentious who evaded discipline. It was only at the beginning of the fifth century that baptism came to be seen as a kind of automatic initiation. Whereas earlier theologians such as Tertullian assumed that children had no need of baptism, since they had

48. It is, for instance, treated as such in the *Didache*, a manual of Christian teaching from the late first or early second century, and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* from the third century.

49. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, XVIII.

50. Wright, "Augustine and the Transformation of Baptism," 68-69.

51. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey, 1.11, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confess>.

52. *Ibid.*, 9.6.

53. This is a recurring theme in fourth-century preaching. See, e.g., Gregory Nazianzen's "Oration on Holy Baptism," <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310240.htm>. Kreider, "Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching," 17-19, sees Emperor Constantine's example as decisive here. Scholars debate whether Constantine delayed his baptism until shortly before death for opportunistic or pious reasons.

54. Unbaptized Christians would not have been given access to the eucharistic table, nor to ordained ministries. Some delayers participated in the catechumenate process as *auditores* (listeners) rather than as *competentes* seeking baptism. André Hamann, "Introduction," *Baptism: Ancient Liturgies and Liturgical Texts*, ed. André Hamann (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1967), 8-9.

yet to sin,⁵⁵ in the fifth century Augustine developed a theology of original sin in which every human being is said to bear Adam's guilt.⁵⁶ Only baptism can wash it away. Augustine put this view forward as part of his effort to defeat those who, in his eyes, taught that people could be saved apart from divine grace by their own good deeds. If, as Augustine thought, God predestined persons to salvation or damnation, then good deeds have nothing to do with salvation. As historian David Wright contends, Augustine's teaching on the necessity of baptism to wash away original sin was easily coordinated with his doctrine of predestination to suggest an equation between baptism and election. Given high infant mortality rates, "baptism became burdened with a heavy incubus of doom."⁵⁷ Midwives commonly baptized newborns throughout the medieval period to ensure their salvation.⁵⁸

After Augustine baptism became automatic, as seen in the spread of infant baptism and most vividly in the forced baptisms of Charlemagne's military campaigns.⁵⁹ Yet, Augustine's theology also provided a means to conceptualize the church as composed of both true and false believers, as a *corpus permixtum* that God will purify at the end.⁶⁰ At the very moment that baptism came to be regarded as a *sine qua non* of salvation and Christian identity, it also became detached from any real expectation of Christian faith. This transformation was made liturgically visible in the creation of separate "first communion" and "confirmation" rites to be administered when the child was of sufficient age to have some idea of what was going on. Thus historians speak of a "disintegration" of Christian initiation during the Middle Ages.⁶¹ Baptism's place within this disintegrated initiation was, to say the least, ambiguous.

Thomas Aquinas exemplifies this turn of events⁶² and to some extent exacerbates them. In his "Questions on Leviticus," Augustine had written of the dependence of the (visible) sacraments on the believer's reception

55. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, XVIII.

56. On the development of Augustine's baptismal theology from the *Confessions* to his late work, see Wright, "Augustine and the Transformation of Baptism."

57. *Ibid.*, 86.

58. James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 33.

59. Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 120.

60. See, for instance, his treatise *On Baptism*, VI.48, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/14086.htm>.

61. J. D. C. Fischer, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval World. A Study in the Disintegration of the Primitive Rite of Initiation* (London: SPCK, 1965); Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999), 177-226.

62. Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 210, 216-217.

of (invisible) grace. Moses, for example, is never seen as undergoing rites of sanctification, even though he administered those rites to Israelite priests. Surely, says Augustine, we would not question Moses' sanctity.⁶³ Aquinas cites this precedent to argue that persons can be saved who desire baptism but, for whatever reason, are unable to receive it.⁶⁴ Conversely, anyone who could desire baptism (they are of age and not mentally impaired) and is baptized without desiring it is not saved. Baptism is still for Aquinas the normal mode of entry into the church and, indeed, it "opens the gate of heaven."⁶⁵ That said, however, the priority of grace means that baptism's regulative status was somewhat ambiguous. As one of Aquinas' great twentieth-century interpreters, Herbert McCabe, wrote, following Aquinas on this point leads to the claim that many spiritual seekers who are not officially part of the Roman Catholic Church via baptism and the maintenance of at least implicit faith may yet have an "invisible," saving relationship to the Church.⁶⁶ Among these he includes some who have never heard of the Catholic Church and those faithful Christians who belong to "schismatic" churches, i.e., the Orthodox and Protestants. Grace may sanctify their inchoate, even unconscious desire for true, Catholic baptism.

The mainstream Reformation movements inherited this basic approach to baptism and initiation, at the same time as they changed the theological underpinnings in diverse ways. But the major challenge to baptism at the Reformation was filed as a minority report by radicals who repudiated infant baptism, some to the point of "rebaptizing" those who had been baptized as infants.⁶⁷ Onetime Luther associates Thomas Müntzer and Andreas Karlstadt were among those who questioned infant baptism and recommended a moratorium on it. Others went further. In Switzerland, Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, Balthasar Hubmaier, and other radicals broke from Zurich's reformer, Huldrych Zwingli, and carried out baptizing ministries throughout the region. Similar movements broke out in Austria and southern Germany, and in the Low Countries and northern Germany. Since the radicals did not regard infant baptism as valid, they did not see themselves as rebaptizing. Their opponents did, labeling them

63. Augustine, "Questions on Leviticus," LXXXIV.—<https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/leviticus/st-augustine-questions-on-leviticus--french>.

64. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.68.2, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4068.htm#article2>.

65. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (New York: Hanover House, 1955-1957), 4.59.4, <http://dhsprpriory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles4.htm#59>.

66. McCabe, *The New Creation* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010 [1964]), 47-50.

67. For the following see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 201-236.

“Anabaptists” (literally, “rebaptizers”) and invoking the Justinian Code as a pretext to hunt and execute them.⁶⁸

A fascinating dimension of this moment in ecclesiastical history is how the response to Anabaptism shaped the baptismal theologies and practices of the other Western churches. This shaping appears negatively in the form of condemnations in Luther’s *Large Catechism* and in the decree “On the Sacraments” from the Council of Trent.⁶⁹ But it is in the Reformed tradition where anxiety over Anabaptism played a particularly central role. Reformed covenant theology, which is at the heart of Reformed theology as such, was largely birthed from Zwingli’s defense of infant baptism against Hubmaier.⁷⁰ Key to Zwingli’s argument was the claim that God had formed one covenant with humanity, and within that covenant there were two dispensations, each with their particular “sign” – circumcision for the Israelite dispensation, water baptism for the ecclesial dispensation. Just as all Israelite male infants were circumcised, so all Christian infants were to be baptized. The two signs, moreover, were united and revealed to be equal precisely by John the Baptist who not only introduced baptism but, as a Jew, would also have been circumcised. For Zwingli and the Reformed tradition after him,⁷¹ it was necessary to affirm the continuity between John’s and Jesus’ baptisms, and between baptism and circumcision, in order to evade the specter of Anabaptism.

Anabaptists deployed the example of Paul’s “rebaptisms” in Acts 19 to vindicate their own baptismal practice.⁷² If Paul did not recognize John’s baptism as genuine, and so felt free to “rebaptize,” then so could the Anabaptists “rebaptize” on the basis of the illegitimacy of infant baptism. Zwingli countered this interpretation by contending that the phrase

68. The Imperial Diet of Speyer (1529) invoked statute 1.6.2 of the Justinian Code, which stipulates death as the penalty for rebaptism. For the statute, see www.uwyo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian/ajc-edition-2/books/book1/book%2016rev.pdf. This statute was initially written against the fourth-century Donatists, who denied the validity of sacraments performed by morally compromised priests. On Donatism, see Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 66-67. Anabaptists were persecuted for a variety of reasons, and not just their baptismal practices.

69. Luther, “Holy Baptism,” *The Large Catechism*, 55, <http://bookofconcord.org/lc-6-baptism.php>; Council of Trent session VII, “On the Sacraments,” canons XI-XIII, <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch7.htm>. On Anglican baptism and Anabaptists, see Alan Kreider, “An English Episcopal Draft Article against the Anabaptists, 1536,” *MQR* 49 (Jan. 1975), 38-42.

70. Timothy George, “The Presuppositions of Zwingli’s Baptismal Theology,” in *Prophet, Pastor, Protestant: The Work of Huldrych Zwingli after Five Hundred Years*, ed. E. J. Furcha and H. W. Pipkin (Alison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1984), 80-82.

71. See, for instance, Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 4.15.7-8, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xvi.html>.

72. For this and the following see Peter Stephens, “Bullinger’s Defence of Infant Baptism in Debate with the Anabaptists,” *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 4, no. 2 (Dec. 2002), 175, 179, 186-187.

“John’s baptism” referred only to John’s teachings, not to his baptizing in water. Perhaps recognizing the limitations of this approach, Zwingli’s successor Heinrich Bullinger accepted that the Ephesian disciples had been baptized with water by John, but not baptized with the Spirit. It was, then, Spirit baptism alone that Paul conferred upon them. Calvin took up this same interpretation in his *Institutes*.⁷³ In line with the Anabaptists on this point, at least, the Council of Trent anathematized those who held “that the baptism of John had the same force as the baptism of Christ.”⁷⁴

By identifying baptism as a sign of the covenant, Reformed theologians restored its regulative function within the church. Baptism for the Reformed is an effective and necessary mode of Christian initiation. Nevertheless, by making it identical to John’s Jewish baptism and functionally identical to circumcision, they made it difficult to discern what is distinctly Christian about baptism. Baptism and circumcision may belong to different dispensations, but their unity under the one covenant and in John the Baptist, a Jew, suggests that the borders between church and synagogue, between Christianity and Judaism, are not absolute.

This abbreviated history could be extended to include the variegated plumage of the “believer’s baptism” traditions, from the Anabaptists to Baptists to Pentecostals, as well as nonbaptizing Christian traditions such as the Quakers and Salvation Army. It could also include the recent ecumenical efforts to search for mutual recognition of baptisms,⁷⁵ and the efflorescence of creative baptismal theologies that began in the twentieth century. The shifting of the sands of traditions under the condition of “postmodernity” has affected baptism, too, as major Protestant theologians Karl Barth (Reformed) and Jürgen Moltmann (Lutheran) have raised penetrating questions about infant baptism,⁷⁶ and Roman Catholics have renewed their interest in adult baptism and catechism.⁷⁷ Baptist

73. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.18; Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2:19 (Acts 19:1-7).—www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom37.vii.i.html. For the place of Anabaptism in shaping Calvin’s general baptismal theology, see Galen Johnson, “The Development of Calvin’s Doctrine of Baptism in Reaction to the Anabaptists,” *MQR* 74 (Oct. 1999), 803-823. One hundred years later, Reformed Christians were still battling Anabaptist (and now Baptist) currents.—Jonathan D. Moore, “The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Sin of Neglecting Baptism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007), 63-86.

74. Council of Trent session VII, “On the Sacraments,” canon I.

75. E.g., the World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Ministry, Eucharist* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).—www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents-commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text.

76. On Barth and Moltmann see Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 137-145.

77. For an introduction see James G. Leachman and Daniel P. McCarthy, “The Formation of the Ecclesial Person through Baptismal Preparation and the Celebrations in the RCIA: The

theologian James McClendon even argues that sometimes refusing to be baptized is a positive “sign” of faith.⁷⁸ The postliberal regulative approach is thus one of many attempts to grapple with baptism’s nature and purpose today.

Such attempts at developing a contemporary baptismal theology should account for the ambiguous character of baptism as it has been identified in the preceding narrative. Baptismal initiation has not simply distinguished Christian insiders from a homogenous outside. Granting the strong evidence for a disjunctive interpretation of baptism, in which baptism serves as a transformative passage from world to church, there are grounds for additional interpretations of baptism. The story of Apollos in Acts 18 suggests that Christian baptism was not at first an exclusive entry point into Christian community. The persistence of multiple forms of ecclesial belonging is apparent in the early centuries of the church, and these forms are widened out in the medieval era by an emphasis on grace that underwrites a hope for the salvation of those with no explicit knowledge of Christ or the church. During the Reformation, debates over rebaptism led Zwingli to insist on the unity of John’s and Jesus’ baptisms under the one covenant that ties Jews and Christians together. After Zwingli the Reformed articulated a baptismal theology in which becoming distinctly Christian through baptism is at once to be related positively, covenantally, to Jews outside the church. Anabaptists and Catholics who rejected the Reformed interpretation and divided John’s and Jesus’ baptisms are still left with the ambiguities in Scripture and their own traditions.

The ambiguities within Catholic baptismal theology have already been discussed—in the hands of the tradition’s greatest theologians, baptism loses its clear function within Christian initiation and the baptized may share their salvation or damnation with the unbaptized. For Anabaptists, these ambiguities may be signs of incoherence and of the need for a strongly regulative baptismal theology such as those offered by Hauerwas and Bauerschmidt. Nevertheless, Anabaptists must reckon with their own ambiguities. I have already mentioned reformers such as Müntzer and Karlstadt who were quite close to the early Anabaptists and yet did not require rebaptism. These figures were perhaps like Paul’s companions who, encountering Apollos, sought to instruct him more accurately about God’s Way, but did not require him to be rebaptized. These reforming

Collects for the Scrutinies,” in *The Liturgical Subject: Subject, Subjectivity, and the Human Person in Contemporary Liturgical Discussion and Critique*, ed. James Leachman (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 172-175.

78. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 394. See also Spinks, *Reformation and Modern*, 154-157. McClendon’s baptismal theology is explored further below.

companions of Anabaptism shared many of their convictions about the Way, including the need for a shift to believer's baptism, but counted the "old" baptism as sufficient for those who had received it. Among the Anabaptists themselves there were sharp disagreements about baptism's purpose and its relation to the work of the Holy Spirit; this dissension contributed to spiritualist leader Caspar Schwenkfeld's decision to call a moratorium on baptism altogether.⁷⁹ Moreover, arguments similar to Thomas Aquinas' can be derived even from a strict separationist such as Dirk Philips: although Dirk maintained a rigorously disjunctive interpretation of believer's baptism,⁸⁰ he also claimed that the "congregation of God" joined by the baptized included God-fearing Jews and "heathens."⁸¹ Other early Anabaptists with more spiritualist leanings made similar points.⁸² Initiation into distinctive community does not preclude, for some Anabaptists, conjunctive relations with others.

The movements descended from sixteenth-century Anabaptism have continued to dispute the theology and practice of baptism over the centuries, as visible in relatively recent controversies over baptism by immersion, the rebaptism of Mennonites who had joined Amish communities, and the possibility of admitting infant-baptized Christians to church membership without requiring rebaptism.⁸³ Although baptism is not at present a major source of debate among Anabaptists and Mennonites, anxiety over a perceived decline of Christian identity in

79. Emmet McLaughlin, "Spiritualism: Schwenkfeld and Franck and Their Early Modern Resonances," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 129.

80. Philips, "The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ," in *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, and Alvin J. Beachy (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1992), 72-111.

81. Philips, "The Congregation of God," in Dyck, et al., *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, 355-356. "Therefore one may reckon not only the Jews and Israelites for the congregation of God, but all who truly confessed, feared, and honored God, have lived according to his will out of the law of nature, enscribed [sic] by God in their hearts" (356).

82. Hans Umlauf, for example, writes in his letter to Stephan Rauchenecker, "I believe that many children of Abraham are to be found among the heathen. . . . So little has God bound his grace and people to the external elements and ceremonies. We really ought to take this to heart and refuse to condemn anyone."—quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981), 295. According to Werner O. Packull, Umlauf was a Saxon shoemaker who joined an Anabaptist community in Austerlitz in 1539. His spiritualist tendencies were tempered by a separatist ecclesiology and a Marpeckian christology.—Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 147-154.

83. See Harold S. Bender, "Baptism," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1955).—<http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Baptism&oldid=130456>; Harold S. Bender and Leland D. Harder, "Church Membership," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1989).—http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Church_Membership&oldid=86795; Paton Yoder, "A Controversy among the Amish Regarding the Rebaptism of Mennonites, 1820-1845," *MQR* 73 (Jan. 1999), 87-106.

North America, Western Europe, and elsewhere may encourage some to follow Bauerschmidt's lead and look to baptism as a practice that unambiguously distinguishes church and world in a time of "diaspora." My hope is that Anabaptists and Mennonites will consider the ambiguities of baptismal practice before taking that step.

CONCLUSION

This essay began with an overview of the "practice turn" in theology. Postliberalism, as noted, has been a signal contributor to that turn, as it construes doctrine as the practice of clarifying the practical grammars that regulate Christian practices. Several recent Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians have developed their work in conversation with postliberalism, and the Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium on baptism featured the postliberal voices of Hauerwas and Bauerschmidt. Examining the latter theologians' baptismal writings confirms suspicions that postliberal theologians tend to regard Christian practices as comprehensively knowable and therefore regularizable in advance of their instantiation. Current Christian knowledge, in this view, is sufficient for conceiving of and guiding practices, and outsiders at best "remind" Christians what they already should know. There is no need, then, for Christians to approach encounters with others with the expectation of mutual edification. Vulnerability to those outside the church is foreclosed. Indeed, regulated as it is by a thesis of difference, baptismal practice separates Christians from those it can no longer learn from or otherwise relate to positively. Baptism, postliberals confidently proclaim, disjoins the ecclesial community from the world that desperately needs it—witness takes the form of a divide whose very presence negates the world.

Notwithstanding the disjunctive strands of Christian Scripture and tradition, other materials on baptism permit a more ambiguous understanding of baptismal practice's mode of relating church and world. Baptized and unbaptized Christians have constituted the church together as early as Paul's ministry in Ephesus. At this point multiple passages into Christian community were acknowledged, and something like this recognition persists in different forms over the following centuries, even among some early Anabaptists. Baptism, from this perspective, does not *simply* distinguish Christians from the world—it also relates Christians positively to other Christians who are seeking God's reign, yet are not baptized, as well as to Jews and others who do not share Christian faith yet are recipients of God's love and mercy. Baptism conjoins Christians with these persons as fellow creatures encountered by God, and so enjoins baptized Christians to engage them with a discerning vulnerability. Through such vulnerability the church might learn about the nature and

purpose of baptismal and other Christian practices. It might learn more truly what it is and could be.

Acknowledging the ambiguity of Christian practice does not require relinquishing all attempts at regulating practice. As James McClendon has written with regard to the multiple points of entry into the church aside from the “front door” of baptism, these additional portals do not “obviate the front door welcome.”⁸⁴ Theologians may continue to articulate how in “standard cases,” God, baptismal candidates, and the church work in concert through baptism to initiate the candidates into the eschatological community, convert and free them from sin, identify them with Jesus, and gift them with the Spirit.⁸⁵

The acknowledgement of baptismal ambiguity—of baptism’s multiple relations to the other doors, and so to church and world—might make a difference, however, to the flexibility of a given regulative regime with respect to developing contexts of practice. For McClendon, ecclesial regulation cannot be divorced from the embodied testimony of believers or from the power of Jesus’ resurrection, which “makes it inescapably clear that *the story* [of discipleship] *is to be marked with incalculable surprises*, and that our lives belong to Christ exactly in terms of surprise endings and turns that mark the resurrection way.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, the divisions among Christians require that we accept the provisionality of our present ecclesial forms as we await the unity prayed for by Christ (Jn. 17).⁸⁷ McClendon thinks that those Christians he calls “baptists,” including Anabaptists and Mennonites, may demonstrate how the acceptance of provisionality fosters unity insofar as baptists have and should be open to ongoing revision of their faith and practice as they seek to follow Christ in

84. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 389.

85. *Ibid.*, 386-387, 390. Yet even in this “standard case” McClendon argues that “conversion” is usually best understood in terms of “fulfillment” (Jesus’ model) rather than “radical reversal” (Paul’s model): “Throughout the centuries, many more have found it possible to come in faith to baptism’s waters as Jesus did, not converted *from* flagrant opposition to him, but turning *with* him toward a life of full faithfulness” (390). For McClendon, entering through the front door does not merely disjoin Christians from their former life.

86. *Ibid.*, 265. Emphasis in the original. On the social, organic, and “anastatic” (resurrectional) strands, see McClendon, *Ethics*, 49-55, 85-118, 165-191, 245-277; McClendon, “Three Strands of Christian Ethics,” in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.*, vol. 2, ed. Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), 17-37; McClendon, *Doctrine*, 285-287. In the “Three Strands” essay, McClendon writes, “the *anastatic* strand has a continuing license to critique the ethic of *chesed* and *agape* [that define the social strand]. . . . Seen in this way, the *anastatic* strand is a summons to adventure” (31).

87. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 344. McClendon conceives of this eschatological unity in terms of unity-in-diversity, not homogeneity (447-449).

their settings.⁸⁸ Commenting on Puritan pastor John Robinson's dictum that "The Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word," McClendon says, "That utterance fixed the element of continuity, namely, Scripture and its Christ, while declaring the biblical word to be an agent of change that must itself change, releasing afresh the mighty, transforming power of God."⁸⁹ The "Scripture's Christ," moreover, repudiates any triumphalism or imperialism among his followers as his way is the way of the cross.⁹⁰

In summary, ecclesial regulation is a legitimate activity insofar as it is accountable to the witness of Christians as they journey with Jesus toward his surprising future, humbly aware of their shortcomings and provisionality, confident that God will work dynamically in the present—and for these reasons as well as the most basic reason, Christ's character and work, are able to hold their regulative structures open to transformation. The context in which a given practice is practiced, therefore, is partially constituted by Christians who will experience that practice in a particular way, and by God who will work through that practice in a particular way; both the experience and the divine action are subject to shift with the twists and turns of the journey. The regulation of practices ought to reckon with these dynamic contextual factors.

Also constitutive of a given context are relations between the church and world that are not exhaustively described in terms of separation. The possibility that baptized Christians might share with unbaptized others, among other things, a status before God should caution against strong regulative theses of difference. Baptism may differentiate and it may connect and it may do both, depending on the character and capacities of the baptized, the church, and the world in a specific time and place. Consider, for instance, McClendon's reflections on historic Christian responsibility for the "anguish of the Jews."⁹¹ The testimony of Jewish anguish at the hands of Christians, culminating in the Holocaust, has led Christians to a time of "historical revision" in which they reconsider their theological convictions about Jewish-Christian relations in light of their

88. *Ibid.*, 451. McClendon calls "baptists" those Christian communities that read Scripture with a "this is that" hermeneutic—implying that they *are* the early Christian communities—and regard eschatological promises with a "then is now" logic—implying that they *are* the eschatological community. In addition to Anabaptists and Mennonites, he includes Baptists, Pentecostals, various Brethren churches, the Stone Campbell churches, and others. See McClendon, *Ethics*, 26-34; McClendon, *Doctrine*, 44-46.

89. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 451.

90. *Ibid.*, 98-102, 182-185. McClendon's theology of cross should be supplemented by Serene Jones's argument that the choice of suffering service requires prior liberation and empowerment. See Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

91. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 354-360.

history.⁹² McClendon reviews some of the major stages of the history, including heroic Christian efforts to rescue Jews during World War II. This part of the story may lead some Christians to identify quickly with the heroes, but McClendon cautions that we “*may do so only if we agree to follow Jesus in a way that will not again lead to the anguish of the Jews.*”⁹³ In fact, the validity of Christian hope for Jews (for example that expressed by Paul in Romans 11) is predicated on the “recovery of a kind of community that renounces all triumphalism, all pride of place, and all anti-Jewish bias.”⁹⁴ This “recovery” is not merely a retrieval of a past model, but requires learning from history as well as from Jews today, for instance, about their ongoing messianic tradition.⁹⁵ Such learning describes a process of post-Shoah theological revision through positive or conjunctive relations to Jews. Baptism today initiates Christians into a community of responsibility in which response to divine judgment for past and present abuses necessitates receptivity to unbaptized others.

92. *Ibid.*, 360.

93. *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

94. *Ibid.*, 361.

95. *Ibid.*