

Society for Ecumenical Studies

Learning from Others:

– Baptists and Receptive Ecumenism

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Introducing the concept of ‘Receptive Ecumenism’, Paul Murray has urged that the fundamental principle is that each tradition should focus on the self-critical question, ‘What can we learn, or receive, with integrity from our various others in order to facilitate our own growth together into deepened communion in Christ and the Spirit?’¹ This stands in contrast to what he identifies as the ‘default instinct’ which too often emerges in the context of ecclesial difference and division, to lead with a question such as ‘What do our various others first need to learn from us?’ The point of the project is to allow ‘learning’ to take precedence over ‘teaching’, to move from an attitude of defensiveness to the kind of attention to the other which has been emphasized by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.² Following Murray’s proposal, I intend in this article to respond to the challenge of considering what Baptists might learn and receive from their ‘others’ among the Christian traditions.³

I also want to follow Murray's lead in affirming that the result of this exercise should be not only to anticipate the time when all will be one in Christ, but also to become 'more deeply, more richly, more fully' what we already are (whether Catholic, Anglican, Methodist or Baptist) through a process of imaginatively and lovingly exploring others' particular gifts.⁴ Referring to the thought of Nicholas Rescher, Murray suggests that such a stance might be called one of 'committed pluralism', taking our own situatedness seriously, starting in the particularity of where we actually are, while 'continually opening it out to testing against what else there is'.⁵ The result will be a 'creative expansion' of current logic rather than simply a conceptual and grammatical clarification of differences. Here, however, I want to suggest adding an element to the process that Murray does not explicitly commend, and which will be reflected from time to time in what follows. If, from the standpoint of a particular tradition (say Baptist) we can identify the *particular way* in which we might receive a truth from others, shaped as we are by our own history and convictions, then it might be appropriate to offer the result of that reception to the ongoing ecumenical conversation. While Murray writes of being 'willing to facilitate the learning of others', he adds 'as requested'. I am envisaging a little more initiative in making a contribution, while aiming not to relapse into the defensive position of 'making others' learning a precondition to attending to one's own'.⁶

While the project of 'receptive ecumenism' opens up hopes for ecumenism in this new millennium, I suggest we can actually find the heart of the current proposal, together with the moderate extension I have suggested, in a book written by a Baptist eighty years ago. In 1918 the General Secretary of the Baptist Union at that time, J.H. Shakespeare, published a book called *The Churches at the Cross-Roads*. In this he was daring enough to propose first a uniting of all Free Churches in England, and then a uniting of this Free Church of England with the established Church of England. This was bold stuff for the leader of the Baptist denomination, and of course he was to be disappointed; while he was taking a firm ecumenical lead, he failed to check whether anyone was following.⁷ At one point in his book he says this about

learning from others:

Do we not feel that we must face the gravest question of all? Is there any reality in the doctrine of the Holy Ghost as the guide and teacher of truth, and if so, can we believe that a form [i.e. episcopacy] which goes back to the beginning of Christian history, and has taken its place “in the greater part of Christendom as the recognized organ of the unity and continuity of the Church” arose without the guidance of the Spirit?⁸

The form of his question expects the answer no: although he is a representative of a tradition which has historically rejected episcopacy, he thinks that we *must* believe the Spirit has been guiding churches in their adoption of this form of church oversight. To this, however, he immediately adds another question: ‘Or, on the other hand, can we believe that the guidance of the Spirit has been so completely withheld from the non-episcopal churches that they have gone quite astray?’ There, I suggest, is a model of mutual learning, based in a theological concept of tradition, the work of the Holy Spirit through the ages. The result of this mutual reception would be, he suggests, a new form of episcopacy that takes seriously the experience of all the churches in the past, and an openness to the Spirit in the present.

I have quoted J.H. Shakespeare as an example of a style of listening to each other, but he also raises two specific areas in which he thinks that Baptists can learn from the wider church – namely the issues of tradition and episcopacy, and I want to begin my reflections with these.

1. *Baptists and tradition*

Christian churches such as Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican have a central place for tradition. It establishes a continuity between the present time and the apostolic age, whether in ministry or in doctrine. Tradition provides an understanding of scripture which is more than individual or private interpretation; it preserves and transmits the mind of the whole church. By

contrast, it is often supposed that Baptists completely reject tradition, in the interests of affirming scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith. There is some truth in this popular picture; as one Baptist writer has put it wryly, 'Baptists have come to make a tradition of rejecting tradition'.⁹ But it is not the whole picture, and if we are to find what Baptists might learn from others about tradition, then we have to discard the stereotypes about the way that Baptists treat this issue. In fact, Baptists do not reject tradition entirely, although many are suspicious about the term itself.

In the first place, Baptists have their own place for the creeds of the church. While it is rare for a creed to be used liturgically as part of worship, the historic confessions of English Baptists, deriving from the seventeenth century, reflect the language of the creeds in their content, and the sequence of the creeds in their overall shape and style. As Steven Harmon has demonstrated,¹⁰ the statements on Christology and Trinity in particular echo the ancient formulations with such phrases as 'true God and true man'¹¹, 'eternally begotten of the Father'¹² and 'the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son' (reflecting the western *filioque*).¹³ While the early confessions provide copious scriptural references for their statements of faith, it is clear that scripture is being read through the lens of Nicaea-Constantinople, Chalcedon and the Westminster Confession. Appropriately for our theme of tradition, some of the confessions refer to the 'holy Catholic Church'.¹⁴ It seems likely that these continuities with the tradition were retained from the Christian communities from which the Baptists had emerged. As Philip Thompson puts it, 'the early Baptists ... believed themselves to be speaking from within a tradition wider than any single communion.'¹⁵

Some of the confessions also explicitly commend the creeds. A General Baptist confession of 1679, for instance, affirms that the Creed of Nicaea, the Apostles' Creed and the so-called Athanasian Creed are to be 'received' and 'believed' and 'taught by the ministers of Christ',¹⁶ and it reproduces the three creeds in its own text. In the later twentieth century the German-language Baptist confession used in Germany, Austria and

Switzerland declares that 'it presupposes the Apostles' Creed as a common confession of Christendom',¹⁷ and the Norwegian Baptists have affirmed 'the content' of both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed.¹⁸

Baptists, then, do not reject creeds, but they do not regard them as finally binding on the Christian conscience, any more than the confessions that they have themselves created from time to time as teaching tools, or to explain themselves to those outside the community. Creeds are important summaries of the faith, reflecting the mind of the church in east and west, to be received and used. Baptists are certainly not alone among the Christian churches in regarding creeds as subject to the scripture to which they intend to provide a guide for interpretation, but Baptists also draw the more radical conclusion that they can be considered as provisional.

A second area of tradition is also not entirely missing from Baptist life. I mean the *corporate* interpretation of scripture, exegesis by the community of the church, expressed in the Roman Catholic *magisterium*, the *sensus fidelium* of the Orthodox Church and the historic formularies of the Church of England. Baptists prize the individual reading of scripture, and look for the leading of God's spirit to understand it; but it would be wrong to say that 'private interpretation' is predominant or conclusive. The interpretation of individuals is subject to the mind of the whole community, gathered in the presence of Christ who rules in the church, and assisted by those to whom the ministry of the Word has been committed by the call of Christ and the recognition of the congregation. Reflecting on the practice of the earliest Baptist church, a congregation of English religious exiles meeting in Amsterdam with John Smyth as their pastor from 1607, Richard Coggins comments: 'Their assumption was that God would reveal his truth to the congregation as a whole, just as the keys and privileges of the church had been committed to the whole congregation'.¹⁹ As the Baptist historian Timothy George puts it in the course of recent conversations between Baptists and Roman Catholics: 'Baptists and Catholics differ on the scope and locus of the *magisterium* but not on whether it exists as a necessary component in the ongoing life of the Church.'²⁰

Further, I suggest that the centrality of preaching in Baptist life bears witness to a kind of tradition alongside scripture. This was especially clear in the practice of John Smyth's congregation, where the scripture would be read and commented upon, and then the book be 'laid aside' for a period of 'prophesying' – a type of inspired preaching which applied scripture to the actual situation in which people found themselves.²¹ Many churches in the eighteenth century were still preserving the tradition of including within worship both an 'exposition' of scripture and a 'sermon' (though 'laying aside' the scripture seems to have been restricted to General Baptist churches in the earlier seventeenth century).²² As well as stressing an openness to the inspiration of the Spirit in the period of preaching, the very arrangement of the worship presupposed that the one Word of God in Jesus Christ could be known *both* in the written scriptures and in the ongoing proclamation of the word. We may say that it could be encountered in scripture and tradition, if tradition is indeed the voice of Christ and the breath of the Spirit which continues in the church through all ages. As Karl Barth puts it, there are 'three forms' of the one and the same Word – Christ, scripture and preaching.²³

2. Learning about tradition

So in the light of this Baptist familiarity with forms of tradition, though rarely under this name, what might be learnt from other Christian churches? A first step is not to fear the term 'tradition' itself, and to retrieve its proper meaning as coming from the *traditio* – the 'handing over' of the faith from generation to generation. Baptists tend to associate the word with Jesus' criticism of merely 'human traditions'.²⁴ They should associate it more with the words that they read in nearly every service of the Lord's Supper: 'For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you', or in several modern translations, 'For the tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself ...'²⁵ These words from the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 11:23) are almost always to be heard at Baptist celebrations of the Lord's Supper, since Baptists take their liturgy for the eucharist directly from scripture, usually reading Paul's 'words of institution'. Listening to other churches should alert Baptists to the positive

sense of tradition in their own story.

Beyond this elementary step, Baptists could learn from other churches that tradition is a dynamic concept, rather than adherence to a fixed body of truths or dogmas, as they often conceive it. There is widespread agreement today that 'tradition' is not essentially a set of items of belief handed down (*tradita*), but is the very *act* of transmission (*traditio*), or 'traditioning'. Several contributions to a forthcoming collection of papers on the theme of tradition by Baptist theologians have in fact leant on the definition of a Roman Catholic theologian, Terrence Tilley, that traditions are 'socially embodied, enduring practices' of living persons.²⁶ Tradition then is a complex set of enduring, but not changeless, practices which characterize the community and its expectations for the future. Traditions are not cold deposits of doctrine, but living forces, and knowing a tradition is a matter of knowing *how* to indwell the tradition, gaining the skill of participating in it. Here, Tilley is elaborating official Roman Catholic theology, at least since the Second Vatican Council, which has understood 'tradition' in this dynamic way. The Council understands revelation to be the Word of God in the sense of a self-disclosure of the triune God, a loving conversation between God and the church as the bride of Christ.²⁷ Tradition, then, is the living process by which the dialogue goes on, while scripture is the inspired, written expression of revelation.

This leads to a further key insight in recent thought about tradition. There are not two sources of revelation, or two sets of truths, one written and one unwritten. There is only one source or well-spring which is the triune God, from which flow two streams – scripture and tradition. In conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church begun in this new millennium, considerable attention has been given to the key paragraph 9 of Vatican II's 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' (*Dei Verbum*), which reads as follows:

Sacred tradition and sacred scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate with one another, For both of them, flowing out of the same divine well-spring, come together in

some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. Sacred scripture is the speech [*or Word*]²⁸ of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching. Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both scripture and tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.²⁹

In ongoing Baptist-Roman Catholic conversations, it has been recognized that this statement meets many concerns of Baptists about the priority of scripture over tradition, and the need for tradition always to stand under the correction of scripture.³⁰ In his commentary on *Dei Verbum*, Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, had stressed the difference as well as the unity between Scripture and tradition: 'it is stated that Scripture *is* the Word of God consigned to writing. Tradition, however, is described only functionally in what it *does*: it hands on the Word of God, but is not the Word of God'.³¹ Tradition is the dynamic process of transmission, 'preserving, expounding and spreading abroad' the Word of God. It is not in itself a set of revealed truths which are supplementary to Scripture and which have no basis in scripture; rather, the statement affirms that the process of tradition increases 'certainty' about the meaning of revealed truths, as the scriptures are read in the communion of saints within the church. Baptists need therefore not react against the clause "not ... from the holy Scriptures alone" (*non per solam sacram scripturam*). It would be odd to deny that tradition could not in any way strengthen our certainty about the meaning of the Gospel. In confessing a trinitarian faith, for example, Baptists are dependent on post-biblical development of doctrine, i.e. tradition, for their 'certainty' about the triune nature of God. The Baptist theologian James Leo Garrett urges that 'Baptists who ... insist on a clearly articulated doctrine of the Trinity, often using terms

easily traceable to the patristic age, would do well to affirm *suprema Scriptura*' rather than an unqualified *sola Scriptura*.³²

It must be admitted, however, that Baptists will have much more difficulty with the concluding phrase that scripture and tradition 'must be accepted and honoured with equal (*pari*) feelings of devotion and reverence', and it is not surprising that this has proved a stumbling-block in ecumenical conversations. It will seem to Baptists, standing in their particular inheritance, that this phrase makes scripture and tradition co-equal as well as co-inherent, and undermines the corrective function of scripture as the 'norming norm' of all development of doctrine. Nevertheless, Baptists can make the imaginative leap of understanding that Roman Catholics see things differently. The phrase, taken from the Council of Trent (though a minority voice even at the time proposed the alternative 'similar [*simili*] feelings'), is perhaps intended to show continuity with Trent when much else in *Dei Verbum* proposes a more dynamic approach to revelation and tradition than the earlier Council. It may be argued that all Vatican II intended by the phrase was to underline that scripture and tradition both come from the same divine well-spring and that they cannot be separated.

This instance of sympathetic disagreement between Baptists and Roman Catholics illustrates what it may mean to engage in receptive ecumenism. One community (Baptist) finds in its history the need to guard against the equalizing of scripture and tradition, but can recognize in the other (Roman Catholic) the need to affirm continuity with an earlier witness of faith. The result is not simply a clarifying of grammar which will 'basically leave the respective churches continuing on their separate ways'.³³ The way has been opened for Baptists to appreciate the Catholic affirmation of tradition as a faithful handing on of the gospel from generation to generation, and as a process of the development of doctrine grounded in the self-witnessing of Christ in his church. One consequence of a Baptist disposition which becomes more positive about tradition might then be to extend 'community exegesis' or 'congregational hermeneutics'³⁴ of scripture beyond the local church. Baptists need to be more aware that, when churches meet together in

associations and assemblies, these are opportunities for discovering what scripture has to say to our contemporary political and social situation. The gathering of churches in ecumenical assemblies can also be seen as places where the faith is to be explored in its contemporary implications, and confessed together in its historic forms. On the other hand, Baptists can offer to the wider Christian world an emphasis on the *sensus* and *consensus* of the whole people of God as an essential element in doctrinal development, alongside the teaching authority of the church. This was, of course, also an insight of John Henry Newman, building on the third test of Catholic truth (consent) proposed by Vincent of Lérins, but one has to observe that Newman ran into strong opposition in extending consent to the laity in his time.³⁵

Another gain from a more positive disposition towards tradition would be for Baptists to learn the advantages of a more *regular* use of the creeds in worship, beyond special occasions. A model covenant service, produced by the Baptist Union of Great Britain for use in churches in the new millennium, provides the Apostles' Creed in its main text, and includes the Nicene Creed in further resources.³⁶ But creeds need to be used more than once a year, even though hymns are regularly sung which contain the substance of the historic creeds. The creeds offer short summaries of the faith in the form of a story and so are very suitable for the context of worship. Rather than offering a list of propositions and doctrines, the creeds celebrate God's drama, from the moment of first creation to new creation, traversing the scenes of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and judgement on the way. The creeds tell the story of the engagement of the triune God with the world, in creation, reconciliation and inspiration; they are about the movement of God through history, and present the Trinity as the supreme meta-narrative. As is being increasingly recognized, Christian worship and preaching must be made more story-shaped, and the more it becomes so, the more room should be made for the creeds.

It must be added that, while a new appreciation of tradition is apparent among Baptists in this new millennium,³⁷ Baptists will always want to keep a place for listening seriously to the individual who believes that he or she has

found a truth in scripture that challenges the prevailing interpretation of the church, whether this be in the local church meeting or in the wider councils of the church. This does not mean that such an individual is always to be followed, but Baptists will want to foster an openness for discerning the Spirit who blows where he wills. God *can* speak to the church through the prophetic individual, as the case of Martin Luther makes clear, or (the Baptist) Martin Luther King.

3. Episcopacy

I began with the openness of the Baptist leader J.H. Shakespeare to episcopacy, which may have seemed surprising. He was, however, assuming that Anglicans of his time had a certain flexibility about the *form* that episcopacy might take, although he was finally to be as disappointed in this expectation as he was in the support of the Free Churches for his visionary project. Accepting that a united church in England must be episcopal, he writes that 'Of course, I do not mean episcopacy as we see it in history, monarchical, prelatical and unconstitutional.'³⁸ In his ecumenical venture he was encouraged by hearing such voices in the Roman Catholic Church as George Tyrrell, whom he found insisting that 'the Church is more than an institution, and that it is the conception of the spirit and personality of Jesus as an abiding presence in the Church which for the Catholic Christian makes the Church a sacrament.'³⁹

In this spirit, Shakespeare created a form of trans-local oversight for British Baptist churches which he called 'superintendents', reviving and developing the seventeenth-century Baptist office of a 'messenger' between the local church and the association of churches. In recent years superintendents have been re-formed as 'regional ministers', with a senior regional minister leading a team of four in most regional associations. In the Baptist view, every local minister is the overseer or 'bishop' of the congregation, since Baptists have generally found no distinction between the offices of elder (*presbuteros*) and bishop (*episkopos*) as we catch glimpses of these offices in the New Testament documents.⁴⁰ Baptists have thus

traditionally operated with a two-fold form of ministry – the ordained minister ('pastor', 'elder', or 'bishop') and deacons, the latter being lay officers who act as pastoral assistants to the minister. While some Baptist churches have recently developed a more complex ministry of deacons, elders and minister these offices are still all to be found in the local church. The inter-church ministry of regional minister is not therefore understood to be a different kind of office from the local minister, but it is exercised with a larger scope.⁴¹ Thus, if the local pastor is a 'bishop', then the office of 'bishop' can be extended into spiritual overseers over groups or associations of churches, beyond the local level. Such persons do not have any executive authority in the churches, but they are there to be leaders of mission in the region, spiritual advisors for the churches when congregations run into conflict, and pastors for the pastors. In the very institution of the regional minister (and earlier the superintendent) it could be said that British Baptists have already learned from episcopal churches, while adapting episcopacy to a Baptist understanding of the freedom of the local church. Other Baptists throughout the world have similar trans-local or inter-church ministries, though they call them by a variety of names, such as 'executive ministers' (USA) or 'presidents' of associations, or even 'bishops' (for example in the Republics of Latvia, Georgia and Moldova).

Having mentioned local 'freedom', it ought to be added briefly that this is not to be understood in the Enlightenment sense of 'autonomy'. In the Baptist understanding the local church is not autonomous in the sense of exercising 'self-rule'. It has liberty to order its own life and mission, and has freedom from external constraint, because the congregation stands directly under the rule of *Christ*. Because Christ rules in the congregation in his three-fold office of prophet, priest and king, the local church cannot be imposed upon by any ecclesial power from outside. The meeting of all the members, bound in covenant relationship to each other and to the triune God, seeks to find the mind of Christ for the ordering of its affairs and the calling of its ministry. However, since associations of churches also stand under the rule of Christ, the local church needs to listen to the way that churches discern the mind of Christ together. Spiritual oversight is thus shared between the church meeting and the minister, and also between the local church and the

association of churches, in the bonds of trust rather than by legal definition.

In the spirit of receptive ecumenism, let us ask what Baptists might learn further from other churches on the theme of episcopacy. I suggest that they might see the great potential there is for the regional minister (or equivalent elsewhere) to be a focus of unity and continuity. There is a symbolic power in this office which is usually not drawn upon in Baptist circles. Here Baptists might learn especially from recent thinking in Anglicanism about the bishop as *sign* of the apostolic succession of the church. Among Anglicans, the question of apostolic continuity has been freshly explored in the *Porvoo Common Statement* which itself builds on the description of apostolicity in the Faith and Order Paper *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.⁴² The Porvoo Statement, agreed between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, affirms clearly that the primary manifestation of apostolic succession is to be found in the church as a whole, as it participates in the mission of Jesus and is faithful to ‘the words and acts of Jesus transmitted by the Apostles’.⁴³ As noted in recent conversations between the Church of England and the Baptist Union of Great Britain:

This means that Anglicans are able to recognize, at a formal level, churches that are not episcopally ordered as sharing in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God. This continuity is served by the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral oversight within the Church. It follows that Anglicans are able to recognize formally the authenticity of such a ministry even when it is not incorporated into the episcopal succession.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, according to Porvoo, the continuous ordination of bishops, to whom is committed the ordination of other ministers, is a ‘sign’ of apostolic continuity. ‘Apostolic succession in the episcopal office is a visible and personal way of focusing the apostolicity of the whole church’.⁴⁵ Baptists welcome this emphasis on the apostolic continuity of the whole people of God, with its implications for mutual recognition as churches of Christ.

However, they decline to accept the necessity of tracing a historic line of succession of episcopal ministry from apostolic times, even as a *sign* of the church's apostolicity, and even within the flexible 'intentional' theology of Porvoo. The agreement proposes that where it is not possible to establish conclusively a linear succession of bishops, the sign is still meaningful and effective when the Church formally 'intends' to have a historic succession from the apostles: 'To ordain a bishop in historic succession, that is in *intended* continuity from the Apostles themselves, is also a sign'⁴⁶. Baptists will see no need for establishing a linear succession in history, intentional or unbroken, but will of course affirm the general continuity of ministry from earliest times, and should reflect more explicitly on oversight as a sign which is given by God to the churches.

Using Paul Murray's vivid language about receptive ecumenism, Baptists might here acquire a kind of 'disposition', or experience a 'spirit-driven movement of the heart' by seeing a gift of God displayed in another tradition. They might see the meaningfulness of regarding the oversight of their own 'regional ministers' as a symbol or sign of apostolic succession. These persons, for instance, *usually* preside over ordinations of ministers, as representing the whole union of churches. It is a way of expressing the fact that the 'spiritual overseer' in the local congregation (bishop, pastor) is a representative on the local scene of the wider church, setting its mission in the context of the church in all times and places. While the local congregation is competent to call its own deacons, it has been the historic practice of Baptists for the call of someone to the ministry of word and sacrament to be recognized by a wider group of churches than any one local congregation alone. We might say that this call of Christ should be recognized by as large a segment of the church universal as is possible in the situation of a broken church, and practically this usually means the union or convention of Baptist churches in one country. But the presiding of the regional minister (or equivalent figure), representing the wider church, is still often regarded simply as a matter of good order rather than a theological requirement. It would deepen the meaning of ordination for Baptists if the inter-church 'overseer' were seen as the guardian of the tradition of the faith, linking the ministry of

word and sacraments in the present with the ministry of the whole church in space and time.

4. Baptism

Unlike tradition and episcopacy, it is in the theme of baptism that Baptists have in the past felt that they have the strongest contribution to make to the riches of the universal church. Throughout their history they have maintained a witness to the *normative* nature of baptism as a practice for disciples of Christ who are able to confess their faith for themselves in the context of a believing community. Here, however, in the spirit of 'receptive ecumenism' I want to consider what Baptists might learn from those churches that practise infant baptism alongside the baptism of believing disciples.

As a prior move, however, a widely-held misconception needs to be cleared away about Baptist theology of baptism. While some Baptists today place emphasis on baptism as a profession of faith, and as a witness to the salvation that God has already brought in a believer's life, there has been a strong voice among Baptists throughout their history that this is not the whole meaning of baptism. The classical Baptist position has been that the personal faith of the disciple interacts in one act of baptism with the transforming grace of the triune God. Baptism in the New Testament, Baptists think, is a dramatic moment of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ which stands as a meeting-place between human faith and divine grace.⁴⁷ To take an example from the early years of English Baptist life, the Particular (i.e. Calvinistic) Baptist Benjamin Keach writes that 'Baptism is a means of conveying this Grace, when the Spirit is pleased to operate with it ... for 'tis the Sacrament of Regeneration, as the Lord's Supper is of Nourishment'.⁴⁸ Similarly the General (i.e. Arminian) Baptist Thomas Grantham writes: 'Baptism in the ordinary way of God's communicating the grace of the Gospel is ... a means wherein not only the Remission of our sins shall be granted to us, but as a condition whereupon we shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.'⁴⁹

In the light of this historic position, I want to make suggestions about

learning from others which I have to admit will be received in varying measures by Baptists today. First, I suggest that Baptists can learn from others about recognizing the grace of God which is at work in the life of a young child. Most Baptists will not want to give the name 'baptism' to the act that others call infant baptism. But they *should* be able to recognize what is being affirmed here about the gracious and prevenient activity of God, about the spirit of God moving deep beneath the surface of life, drawing the child to God and preparing him or her to place faith in Christ in due time.⁵⁰ Baptists do in fact have a ritual for receiving infants into the community of the church, a service of dedication and blessing, in which parents make promises before God and the minister blesses the child on behalf of the church. Baptists think they are imitating the act of Jesus here, who is reported in the gospels to have taken young children up in his arms and blessed them (Mk. 10:13-16). Baptists can learn from paedobaptist churches that this blessing is an effective act, through which God chooses to be graciously present.

Second, Baptists can learn from the practice of infant baptism about the part that the faith of the church can play in an individual's life. For paedobaptists there is indeed an act of faith in the baptism of a young child – it is not the individual faith of the child but it is the faith of the parents and community, wrapping the child around and having an impact in its growth and development. Gospel stories tell us that Jesus was able to act in the lives of certain individuals because of the faith of others. Even where Baptists do not recognize infant baptism as proper baptism, they can learn of the part that the faith of the church plays in their *own* act of infant blessing, and the part that it plays in the baptism of a believing disciple as the whole community stands around the pool with the candidate.

Third, *some* Baptists will be able to learn that God gives a place to infant baptism in the whole process of initiation, or the beginning of the Christian life. In recent ecumenical conversations, Baptist participants have been urging other churches to envisage initiation as a process or journey which includes more than the act of baptism alone.⁵¹ Such a journey of beginnings will include nurture within the Christian community, an act of

conscious faith by the disciple, baptism itself, a receiving of the gifts of the Spirit, a commissioning to participate in God's mission in the world, and sharing in the eucharist or Lord's Supper for the first time. For some – those coming to faith at a mature age – the journey will be relatively rapid, but for others – especially children who are brought up within the church – it will be slow and gradual. The language of journey is in fact used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which affirms that 'From the time of the apostles, becoming a Christian has been accomplished by a *journey and initiation in several stages*.'⁵² Baptists will want to insist that this journey (which is only the first stage, of course, of the whole adventure of the Christian life) has not come to an end without a person's own acceptance of Christian discipleship, and a commissioning to share in God's mission in the world. For Baptists, this always coincides with baptism, but some Baptists may be prepared to see that infant baptism – even if not able to express the whole meaning of baptism as a 'grace-and-faith' event – can still be a stage on the way to that moment.

These three suggestions about what Baptists can receive from others do not require Baptists to say that the baptism of infants and the baptism of believing disciples are *exactly the same* kind of event. Baptist rejection of this identification accounts for resistance to the notion of 'common baptism'. But, seeing the evidence of God's grace in the lives of those who have been baptized as infants in other churches, it may be possible to affirm a 'common initiation', recognizing that God has various pathways by which to bring people to discipleship in Christ. In turn Baptists hope that other churches will recognize more explicitly that infant baptism does not make for complete initiation into Christ, but that initiation needs to be completed by a faith which is owned by the disciple himself or herself, and which can be expressed in a moment such as confirmation.

5. The Visible Church

Our first three themes have raised, in one way or another, the question of the church: baptized into the church, we are shaped by its tradition and guided by its oversight. Baptists can be prompted by others, I suggest, to reflect further

on the nature of the church, and especially the universal church, as a *visible* reality. Here I want to suggest a fruitful engagement with the Orthodox tradition, although I could equally well have chosen the Roman Catholic stress on the universal church as a 'visible society and a spiritual community'.⁵³

Baptists reflected from their earliest days on the relation between the 'invisible church' and 'visible saints', understanding the 'invisible church' to be the total company of all the redeemed, whether they were inside or outside the visible church, and whether they lived in the past, present or future. Those in the Calvinistic tradition understood the 'invisible church' or the 'spiritual kingdom'⁵⁴ to be all God's elect, those named for salvation from before the beginning of the world and for whom Christ had died. Saints became 'visible' when they gathered in 'particular congregations' to live under the covenant rule of Christ, and when their profession of faith and their ethical behaviour gave visible evidence that they were indeed chosen to be sons and daughters of God.⁵⁵ Baptists in the Arminian tradition also understood the 'invisible church' to be the whole number of the regenerate, although they did not restrict the elect to a fixed and predetermined number of persons.⁵⁶ There was a tendency, then, simply to identify the 'invisible church' with the church universal in contrast to the local congregation. For instance, the article headed 'Of the invisible catholick Church of Christ' in a General Baptist confession of 1678 affirms that 'There is one holy catholick church, consisting of, or made up of the whole number of the elect',⁵⁷ while the accompanying article 'Of the catholick Church as visible' states that 'we believe the visible church of Christ on earth is made up of several distinct congregations, which make up that one catholick church, or mystical body of Christ.'⁵⁸

According to Orthodox theology, the 'visible church' is the *whole* church here on earth, though composed of many specific congregations. The title 'invisible church' essentially refers to the church in heaven, the glorified saints and the angels. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy strongly insists that there are not two churches but only one. In its theology and in its liturgy, it affirms one communion, one continuous reality. Entering the inner sanctuary, beyond the icon-screen, to consecrate the elements for the eucharist, the bishops, priests

and deacons are sharing in the heavenly worship. In Orthodox thinking, the 'invisible church' is not an undivided, ideal reality in heaven in contrast to a divided church on earth. The true church exists here and now on earth, visible *and* undivided; it must be one because God is one.⁵⁹ Its unity is not maintained, however, by some superior bishop endowed with a universal jurisdiction; it is united through communion. The local church is unified by its gathering to celebrate the eucharist, gathered round its bishop. The church universal is unified by the communion of the bishops with each other, as the heads of the local churches. While the communion of churches is the Catholic Church, *each* local church is also the Catholic church, the church in wholeness, showing the marks of the overcoming of all human barriers between people of different backgrounds.⁶⁰

Unlike the Orthodox, early Baptists *did* think that there was an invisible church here and now on earth, but they did not use this concept as a justification for rejecting wider visible structures of the church beyond the local congregation, as sometimes happens today among Baptists opposed to any movement towards 'visible unity'.⁶¹ The catholic church was visible nowhere in its completeness, and one could be sure of finding it visible in particular congregations, but this did not mean that the body of Christ could not *also* be made manifest in wider groupings of churches. The *London Confession of 1644*, a Particular Baptist statement, envisages a communion of local churches that certainly seems to make the body of Christ manifest together:

....though we be distinct in respect of our particular bodies, for conveniency sake, being as many as can well meet together in one place, yet are all one in communion, holding Jesus Christ to be our head and Lord.⁶²

The communion envisaged is not simply invisible, but involves visible structures, since the congregations are 'all to walk by the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.'⁶³ An ecclesiology centred on the body of Christ

is bound to tend towards visibility, since the concept of 'body' is about manifestation and tangible reality. Nevertheless, Baptists have been hesitant about articulating the visibility of the church beyond the local congregation.

A receptive approach to the Orthodox insistence on the visible church, and especially an imaginative entering into its worship, might well lead to ways of thinking about the visibility of the universal church which are still rooted in Baptist tradition. Baptists might think more in terms of a constant *becoming* visible of the whole catholic church. While we never have the universal church in its fulness here on earth, before the dawning of new creation, there is a momentum *towards* visibility, towards making the face of Christ known in the world through the many features of his members, first at the local level but also in inter-communion. The many gifts are distributed among the many churches, and for the body to work as one we must work for structures, assemblies, where this unity becomes manifest. Baptists will, however, question the equating of visibility with *indivisibility*, whether in the Orthodox or Roman Catholic version of ecclesiology. It is the tragedy of the church to have been broken through the contingencies and conflicts of history. It is visible indeed, but in pieces whose fragmentation is a scandal to the world and which enters the heart of God as a cause of grief and pain. It is the divine humility, we may say, to go on owning the church despite its divided state. If the visible, universal church must be undivided here and now then churches with a strongly unified structure are the only candidates for the title, and others are excluded from 'true church' even though they may be recognized as showing 'marks' of the church. To insist on the indivisibility of the *visible* church seems, for Baptists, to verge towards the danger of limiting the work of the Spirit.

So we seem to have come full circle, back to J.H. Shakespeare's question about the work of the Spirit through the ages. We return to what he calls 'the gravest question of all'. Is there, he asks, 'any reality in the doctrine of the Holy Ghost as the guide and teacher of truth'? If so, 'receptive ecumenism' will be eager to learn from the various ways in which different Christian traditions have been so guided, and so taught.

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- ¹ Paul D. Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda', *International journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 7:4 (2007), 279-80.
- ² See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 48-52, 79-81.
- ³ This article extends a talk I was invited to give on the subject at a conference of the Society for Ecumenical Studies, London, 3 November 2007.
- ⁴ Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism', 292
- ⁵ Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism', 283.
- ⁶ Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism', 290.
- ⁷ See Peter Shepherd, *The Making of a Modern Denomination. John Howard Shakespeare and the English Baptists 1898-1924* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), 121-8.
- ⁸ J.H. Shakespeare, *The Churches at the Cross-Roads. A Study in Unity* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1918), 83. The quotation is from the *Second Interim Report of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York's Committee and by Representatives of the English Free Churches' Commissions*, reprinted in Shakespeare, *Churches at the Cross-Roads*, 221-3.
- ⁹ Philip Thompson, 'Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical, Theological and Liturgical Analysis', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 27/3 (2000), 302.
- ¹⁰ Steven Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity. Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2006), 72-81.
- ¹¹ Particular Baptist *Somerset Confession* (1656), art. 13, in W. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), 206; General Baptist 'The Unity of the Churches' (1704), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 340.
- ¹² Particular Baptist *Second London Confession* (1677), 2.3; General Baptist *The Orthodox Creed* (1679), art. 3. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 253, 299.
- ¹³ John Smyth, *Propositions and Conclusions* (1612), 52; Particular Baptist *London Confession* (1644), art. 3; *Second London Confession*, 2.3. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 133, 156-7, 253.
- ¹⁴ *Second London Confession*, 26.1; *Orthodox Creed*, art. 29. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 285, 318.
- ¹⁵ Thompson, 'A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking a Catholic Spirit among Early Baptists', *Pro Ecclesia* 8/1 (1999), 71.
- ¹⁶ *Orthodox Creed*, art. 38, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 326-7.
- ¹⁷ G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe. History and Confessions of Faith* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), 57. So also the Confession of the Baptist Union of Finland, *ibid.*, p. 111.
- ¹⁸ Parker, *Baptists in Europe*, 111.
- ¹⁹ James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1991), 120.
- ²⁰ Timothy George, 'Scripture and Tradition: An Evangelical Perspective', unpublished paper given at the theological conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church, Birmingham, Alabama, 10-15 December 2006.
- ²¹ Christopher Ellis, *Gathering. A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 46-7.
- ²² See Ellis, *Gathering*, 52.
- ²³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, transl. and ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (14 volumes; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-77), I/1, 88-124.
- ²⁴ Mk. 7:5-13; Matt. 15:1-9.
- ²⁵ E.g. *The New English Bible/ Revised English Bible*.
- ²⁶ Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 40. See the essays by Mark Medley and Barry Harvey in Roger Ward and Philip Thompson (eds.), *Baptists and Tradition* (Carlisle: Paternoster, forthcoming 2009).
- ²⁷ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 8, in Austin Flannery, O.P., (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1977), 754-5.
- ²⁸ Latin: *locutio dei*.
- ²⁹ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 9, in Flannery (ed.), 755.
- ³⁰ See Steven Harmon, 'Dei Verbum 9 in Baptist Perspective', unpublished paper given at the theological conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church, Rome, 3-8 December 2007.
- ³¹ Joseph Ratzinger, 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Chapter II, The Transmission of Divine Revelation', in Herbert Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Volume 3, transl. Lalit Adolphus, Kevin Smyth and Richard Strachan (London: Burns & Oates, 1967-69), p. 194.

- ³² James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 181.
- ³³ Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism', 289.
- ³⁴ The phrase is coined by Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 157-85.
- ³⁵ Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 6; John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 54-5.
- ³⁶ *Covenant 21. Covenant for a Gospel People* (London: Baptist Union, 2000), pp. 10-11.
- ³⁷ See the books and papers listed in notes 7, 8, 13, 18, 24 above.
- ³⁸ Shakespeare, *Churches at the Cross-Roads*, 181.
- ³⁹ Shakespeare, *Churches at the Cross-Roads*, 183.
- ⁴⁰ For example, *Second London Confession*, 26.8, 'Bishops or Elders', in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, p. 287. However, the *Orthodox Creed*, 31, places bishops in a three-fold order of ministry.
- ⁴¹ See Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces. Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 90-93, 221-6.
- ⁴² *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 28-9.
- ⁴³ *Together in Mission and Ministry. The Porvoo Common Statement* (London: Church House Publishing, 1993), pp. 23-4
- ⁴⁴ *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity. Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 84.
- ⁴⁵ *Together in Mission and Ministry*, 26.
- ⁴⁶ *Together in Mission and Ministry*, 27.
- ⁴⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan), 305.
- ⁴⁸ Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin'd: or Baptism in its Primitive Purity* (London: 1689), 173.
- ⁴⁹ Thomas Grantham, *A Sigh for Peace: or the Cause of the Division Discovered* (London: 1671), 87-8.
- ⁵⁰ This is the position of George Beasley-Murray, in 'The Problem of Infant Baptism: An Exercise in Probabilities', in *Festschrift Günter Wagner*, ed. Faculty of the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüslikon (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 9.
- ⁵¹ See *Baptism and Church Membership, with particular reference to Local Ecumenical Partnerships*. A report of a working party to Churches Together in England (London: CTE, 1996), 13; *Conversations Around the World 2000-2005; The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance* (London: The Anglican Consultative Council and the Baptist World Alliance, 2005), 44-51; *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity. Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation*, 31-57; *Dialogue between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe and the European Baptist Federation on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism*, Leuenberg Documents 9 (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 2005), 22-23.
- ⁵² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, validated by Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* 11 October 1992 (available www.vatican.va/archive/catechism), 1229.
- ⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 771.
- ⁵⁴ *The London Confession* (1644), art. 33, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 165.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* See also *Second London Confession*, 26.2, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 285.
- ⁵⁶ E.g. Smyth, *Propositions and Conclusions*, 64; *Orthodox Creed*, art. 9. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 136, 303.
- ⁵⁷ *Orthodox Creed*, art. 29, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 318.
- ⁵⁸ *Orthodox Creed*, art. 30, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 319.
- ⁵⁹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*. New Edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 245.
- ⁶⁰ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 147-53, 235-6.
- ⁶¹ An influential voice here has been Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1909), pp. 887-91.
- ⁶² *London Confession*, Preface, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 155.
- ⁶³ *London Confession*, art. 47, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168-9.