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Doing Theology in a Baptist Way

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I assume that the topic given me for this paper is aimed at engaging our thinking with some aspects of the Baptist way of being a distinct Christian community as well as to pay tribute to the association of the Dutch Baptist College with the Free University in Amsterdam.² It is an honourable task especially in view of the forthcoming 400 year jubilee anniversary of organised Baptist life in Europe³ and the sheer size of diverse Baptist communities in a fellowship of more than a hundred million followers of Christ around the globe. It is also a demanding assignment and therefore, in approaching the task, worth qualifying the use of the terms employed in the title of the paper. By this we may clear some possible misunderstandings and help laying the grounds for a fruitful conversation today.⁴

*The Baptist way of being a Christian community.*⁵ I want to argue that, while Baptists with capital 'B' may claim specific historic beginnings in early seventeenth century Britain and the

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² Effective January 01, 2009 for master's level studies of the students of the Baptisten Seminarium at the University (master of theology) and at the College (master's qualification for ministerial service among Dutch Baptists).

³ European Baptists and representatives of the world-wide Baptist fellowship will celebrate this significant event in Amsterdam from 24-26 July, 2009 in the surroundings of the RAI Centre in Amsterdam. The early Baptists led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys gathered for worship in 1609 in part of the East India Bakehouse, in Bakkerstraat, a building owned by a Mennonite Jan Munter (the original bakery was probably located behind the present-day Amstel Street 120. For more details see Ian Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Prague, EBF/ Erlangen, Germany: Neufeld Verlag Schwartzfeld, 2009) and <http://www.amsterdam400.org/>.

⁴ I want to express my gratitude to my colleagues The Rector Dr Keith G Jones, Dr Ian M Randall, Prof John HY Briggs, Dr James GM Purves and to the Dutch Baptist scholars The Rector Teun van der Leer and Dr Henk Bakker for the careful reading and comments on the draft of this paper.

⁵ The notion of community is prominent in current theological discourse, but is used in a variety of ways that can obscure the meaning of the term. To simplify, in most cases the notion refers to a "thin" community. It is a virtue excelling community. It is held together by a limited range of interest. For the purpose of this work, I assume "thick" communities which are character forming and transforming. Members interact in a variety of practices and in doing so build identity. Community formation and transformation call for a common understanding and mission, for a lived out vision, for discipleship with care and discipline of watching-over one another's lives not without tension. To use Terrence W. Tilley's picture language, these are "communities of solidarity, resistance, and fellowship, (*Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 151." Originally I have introduced the distinction of "thin" and "thick" communities for the purpose of defining primary and secondary levels of theologising to which I will refer later in the paper. It has been used and extended further by Nigel G Wright in his *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 256, 280, and Einike Pilli in her doctoral work *Terviklik Elukestva Öppe Kontseptsioon Eesti Protestantlike Koguduste Kontekstis* (A Holistic Concept of Life-Long Learning in the Context of the Estonian Protestant Church), *Dissertationes Theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis Series*, volume 8 (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2005), 29-30.

Netherlands,⁶ their way of being Christians is not uniquely Baptist. It has been argued persuasively by theologians and historians alike that Baptist marks of ecclesial identity are shared by a wide variety of groups with strong family resemblance. These groups together form a major stream of being Christian, a people of God following in the steps of the Radical Reformation.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin admitted half a century ago that “it is difficult to give a single name to this stream of Christian tradition,”⁷ and yet it does have a robust manner of “ingrafting into Christ” having being incorporated in the Body of Christ by “receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit”⁸ on an equal footing with traditionally recognised catholic (and orthodox) and protestant communions. He named it the “pentecostal” (with small ‘p’) stream without too close an

⁶The debate about the origins of the Baptists is still going on. As it has been pointed to me by Prof Briggs, one school of historians is holding a view that Baptist life originated in the Netherlands in close association with the Waterlander Mennonite communities in early 1600’s (e.g. Ernest Alexander Payne in the UK and William R Estep and Glen H Stassen in the USA). There is that other school of historians who believe that Baptists have their roots in English separatism or extreme leftward Puritanism (e.g. Winthrop S Hudson in the USA and Barrie R White in the UK). Those who take the latter line are likely to emphasise the relationship of the Baptists with English Congregationalists rather than Dutch Mennonites. In the 19th century there was considerable anticipation of the amalgamation of the ‘two streams of Congregational life’ articulated by people like John Clifford. In 1862 and 1900 the two denominations symbolically had united assemblies. For an overview of the nature of the debate, see Ian Sellers, “Edwardians, Anabaptists and the problem of Baptist Origins,” *The Baptist Quarterly*, the journal of the Baptist Historic Society in the UK, Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (July 1981), 97-112, and Kenneth R Manley, “Origins of the Baptists: The Case For Development from Puritanism – Separatism,” in William H Brackney with Ruby J Burke, eds. *Faith, Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990* (Birmingham, Al: Samford University Press, 1990), 56-69.

Significantly for the argument of this paper, the two denominations have tended to diverge in the 20th century – theologically with the Baptists favouring conservatism in their Evangelicalism and caution in their approach to the Scriptures whilst the Congregationalists were friendlier to the liberal theological positions. The differences became even more evident in polity and ecclesiology for the Congregational Union became the Congregational Church. Thus the expression of ecclesial identity was moved from the local congregation to the national body. This step naturally evolved into Congregational Church joining with the English Presbyterians to the United Reformed Church—a union on the basis of theology rather than ecclesiology. In so doing the Congregationalists joined with a church which had a strong Protestant and ethnic identity with relationship to diaspora Scots. It is significant today that United Reformed Church tends to form partnerships with European landeskirchen. Baptists in the UK on the other hand identify with evangelical (in the European sense of the word) minorities. Following Prof Paul Fiddes, I will take on the notion of identification later in this paper.

Reviewing historic origins of the Baptists one must take a note of the third strand to Baptist life in continental Europe, for most of its churches are neither the fruits of Dutch/Swiss anabaptism nor British Puritanism but have their roots in the indigenous revivalism, particularly Pietism and therefore are much less conscious of the covenant nature of the church or the social responsibility of its members as their counterparts on the British islands. Pietism (as later Charismatic renewal movements within established churches) is an interesting phenomenon existing as it has done with its own structures within those of the landeskirchen as a kind of safety valve allowing those touched by ‘enthusiasm’ not to separate from the church. Sometimes the tension between the revivalist and mainstream groups becomes too great and then revivalism/ pietism becomes the nursery out of which various free-church movements emerged. For further details see Parush Parushev and Toivo Pilli, “Protestantism in Eastern Europe to the Present Day,” in Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks (eds.), *The Blackwell's Companion to Protestantism* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 155-60, and Randall, *Communities of Conviction*. Accounting for diversity among baptistic movements, one may find helpful Dr Payne’s insightful observation that: “Ideas had legs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as they have today.” (See, his “Who Were the Baptists?” *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, No. 8 (October 1956), 340 (pp. 339-342)).

⁷ *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954, 1953), 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

association with that group of denominations that bear the name. James Wm McClendon, Jr a prominent North American Baptist theologian, suggested the name “baptist” with lower case ‘b’ for this stream. Recently the term “baptistic” became widely accepted. After surveying a number of settings of Baptist expressions in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, a team at the institution which Rector Dr Keith G Jones and I represent agreed on the following descriptor for this way of giving expression to Christian faith:

By 'baptistic'⁹ is meant those of the free church and believers' baptism tradition. This term is used as an umbrella term for a variety of believing communities ('gathering' churches) practising believers' baptism, and demanding radical moral living, such as [Anabaptists,] Baptists or Pentecostals. It can also include a number of other groups in the regions, such as Adventists and [Mennonite] Brethren. (There is an overlap with the use of the term 'Evangelical' in the Central and Eastern contexts—sometimes in denominational names). It excludes churches in which members think in terms of ethnicity or geographical and political boundaries and in which people typically baptise their children into these ethno-geo-religio-identities. That is, 'baptistic' excludes traditionally state sponsored ecclesial bodies.

In this paper I will use the term 'baptistic' when referring to the “pentecostal” stream as a whole and I will reserve the term “Baptist” for referring to the particular Baptist expression within that stream.

I have argued elsewhere the case for the identifying distinctive hermeneutical, ecclesiological and missional perspectives among baptistic Christians. In their understanding,

God is known by what he does in their midst. By constructing new ways of social living they succeed in conveying, non-abrasively, the power of God to create anew in those and through those who are united to Christ (2 Cor 5.17). Stressing the immanence of God, they see themselves embodied in the narrative of the Kingdom of God revealed in and through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Reviewing different proposals offering descriptive expressions of baptistic life and practice made by historians, philosophers and theologians, McClendon identifies at least five theological distinguishing marks or experiential senses of being a baptist (note the small ‘b’)¹¹: a) the stress on the use of biblical story as trustful guiding for both faith and practice and as effecting a direct narrative link of the present community with the communities of the apostles making the biblical

⁹ For the origination of the terms 'baptist,' 'baptistic,' see James Wm McClendon, Jr., “The Believers Church in Theological Perspective,” in Stanley Hauerwas et al, eds, *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 309-26 and Lina Andronovienė and Parush Parushev, “Church, State, and Culture: On the Complexities of Post-soviet Evangelical Social Involvement,” *Theological Reflections, EAAA Journal of Theology*, # 3 (2004), 194-212. Cf. McClendon’s earlier account of the theological heritage of baptistic (or ‘baptist’) communities in *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Vol. I*, revised edition published posthumously (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 1986), 17-34. For a collection of writings produced from a baptistic perspective since the beginning of fifteen century, see Curtis W Freeman et al, eds., *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Parush R Parushev, *Christianity in Europe: the way we are now*, Crowther Centre Monographs Series of the Church Missionary Society (Oxford, UK: CMS Publishing, 2009, forthcoming); Cf. Idem., A Baptist’s Perspective on the Ecumenical Plurality of Missional Witness to the Way of Christ, in Bernd Jochen Hilberath et al., eds., *Ökumene des Lebens als Herausforderung der wissenschaftlichen Theologie/ Ecumenism of Life as a Challenge for Academic Theology* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2008), 275-296, and “Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics,” in *The ‘Plainly’ Revealed Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009, forthcoming).

¹¹ *Ethics*, 26-34. For his earlier account of baptistic distinctive marks, see “What Is A ‘baptist’ Theology?” in *American Baptist Quarterly*, vol. 1 # 1 (October 1982), 23-28 (pp. 16-39).

story the baptist's own; b) the freedom of conscience as a God's given gift to a believer or to a faith community to congregate voluntarily, to respond to God without interference of a state or other power structures, including the structures of institutional religion, and "to live without violence in a violent age"¹²; c) the following of Jesus' way in mutual submission to the care of the community of disciples under the Lordship of Christ (much as with the Christ-centred *Nachfolge Christi* of the earlier Anabaptists); d) and, correspondingly, the forming of intentional gathering interdependent communities¹³ in a daily sharing in the storied life incorporating biblical vision in deliberate opposition to the Constantinian marriage of church and nation state; e) the responsibility to witness to what life in Christ means both to persons and to the state in words and deeds and to endure the suffering this witness may entail.

Our colleague Dr Ian M Randall – a well-known Baptist historian, has surveyed recently the formative periods of the European Baptist stories.¹⁴ Using history as laboratory for understanding crucial convictions which marked early Anabaptist and Baptist communities, he came to a surprisingly similar list of five distinctive marks of Baptist self-understanding: the particular way of reading the biblical story together in a community, living the costly life in the imitation of Christ, covenanting together and nurturing a Spirit-led community, redeeming the powers of the flawed world order by offering an alternative social way of communal living, and a missional commitment to telling the biblical story.

These sets of markers provide neither prescriptive norms for, nor universal characteristics of, a baptistic community. They are instead descriptive markers how visible unity might be envisioned, — that is through a stable pattern of identification among the specificities and particularities of baptistic ways of life¹⁵ that constitute "a very notable movement to which all the churches of the modern world owe a debt."¹⁶

McClendon further insists that a binding vision is needed to bring coherence among different expressions of integrated forms of Christian living within the community. The baptistic way of being a Christian community is best seen in the narrative, hermeneutical perspective of aligning congregational life with the biblical story. It is the "shared awareness of *the present Christian community as [both] the primitive community and the eschatological community*"¹⁷ In other words, "*we* are Jesus' followers; the commands are addressed directly to *us*."¹⁸ I will turn now to view in some detail the three horizons of this bi-focal hermeneutical perspective.

¹² "What Is A 'baptist' Theology?" 28.1

¹³ On the significance of the communal interdependency in, particularly European Baptist's life, see Keith G Jones, "The European Baptist Federation: A case study in European Baptist interdependency 1950-2006," PhD Thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff UK, June 2007.

¹⁴ "Tracing Baptist Theological Footprints: A European Perspective," a plenary paper for the at the Seventh Quinquenary Baptist International Conference of Theological Education (BICTE VII), Prague, Czech Republic, July 26-29, 2008 (forthcoming in the proceeding of the conference).

¹⁵ For a discussion of Baptist identity and theology of identification, see Paul S Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, in *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, volume 13 (Carlisle : Paternoster Press, 2003), 14-16.

¹⁶ Payne, "Who Were the Baptists?" 342.

¹⁷ *Ethics*, 30; italics of McClendon.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33; italics of McClendon.

*An inquiry into baptistic hermeneutical perspective.*¹⁹ Attempting to speak on the behalf of the baptistic stream of being a Christian community is a notoriously difficult task. It involves navigating between positing a narrow parochial perspective as the tradition (substituting one for many); and making typological generalizations such that no one particular ecclesial form of life will feel fairly represented. While there are no agreed-upon confessional boundaries, the stream has marks of a robust ecclesial identity, as listed above. The marks fit well with other nationally and internationally agreed upon twentieth-century documents on the Baptist identity, particularly with the Statement ratified by the Baptist Heritage Commission of the Baptist World Alliance in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (July 1989).²⁰ These identifying marks, or better, characteristic practices of baptistic life are the common property of diverse communities, arising as they do from a distinct hermeneutic. On several occasions, and following in the track of his Mennonite predecessor Harold Bender's earlier account of the envisioning Christianity through "the Anabaptist vision,"²¹ McClendon referred to the theological hermeneutics of the stream as a "baptist vision."²² I will follow McClendon's version of baptistic hermeneutical perspectivism as outlined in his *Ethics*.²³

McClendon finds the hermeneutical key to the identity and vision of baptistic communities in their distinctive reading strategy of the biblical story. It is a bi-focal strategy in which communities find themselves involved both as part of the biblical story and yet also examined by it: it is "that" eschatological moral vision of the New Testament communities which defines "this" present moral life of a community (or of a person in it). And it is also the "then" of the future fulfilment of the Kingdom vision that verifies the "now" of everyday living.

Moreover, baptistic hermeneutics begin in "the middle of things" to use Archbishop's Rowand Williams catch phrase.²⁴ "What holds the beginning, middle, and end of a story together ... [is]

¹⁹ Here I am building on my previous enquiries into the specifics of baptistic hermeneutical perspectivism presented in "Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics."

²⁰ "Towards A Baptist Identity," in Brackney with Burke, *Faith, Life and Witness*, 146-149. Walter B Shurden considers it "the single best statement of the Baptist identity issued by a group of Baptists in the twentieth century," in *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Ga: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 1993), 63.

²¹ *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1944). Bender was arguing that Anabaptists had a distinctive "way of seeing" the realities of Christian life as discipleship, the church as brotherhood and the Christian ethics as love and nonresistance (Ibid., 20).

²² "The baptist Vision," unpublished graduation address at the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschtikon, Switzerland (April 25, 1985), available upon request through the Library of IBTS currently in Prague, Czech Republic; *Ethics*, chapter one; "The Baptist and Mennonite Vision," in Paul Toews, ed., *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation* (Winnipeg and Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1993), 211-24; "The Voluntary Church in the Twenty-first Century," in William H. Brackney, ed., *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1998), 180-88; "The Believers Church in Theological Perspective."

²³ 'Perspectivism' or 'soft perspectivism' is a technical term introduced by McClendon and James M Smith to distinguish an epistemological position different from absolutism and relativism in *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, revised edition (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994, 1975). Perspectivism "regards convictional conflict as expected, but not inevitable, fundamental but not ultimate, enduring but not inherently ineradicable (Ibid, 9)." Contrary to absolutism, such a view recognises "the great, contrary variety of human convictional communities, and acknowledges that the truth perceived in one is not easily translated into the truth of another community." It is also at variance with relativism by not assuming that "there is *no* truth that is true (*Ethics*, 346; italics of the authors)."

²⁴ *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

the linking of its parts into one narrative,”²⁵ which is the life of the community itself. The community must look back the way to its past as well as forward to its future.²⁶ While looking backwards, it is not intended that the community should become retrograde, dissenting or sectarian. It is rather looking “forward to the roots.”²⁷ Such a perspective sees that the narrative of the Bible, “the story of Israel, of Jesus, of the church, is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live.” Similarly, looking forward is not a speculative futuristic exercise. It is an acute alertness that the story of the Kingdom of God proclaimed and lived out by the prophets, by Jesus and by his disciples, is still the story that shapes our lives today. Yet we choose to take different paths to lead us to the Kingdom. This theological vision functions as a hermeneutical key “construing our experience by the way of Scripture.”²⁸ The vision operates with two guiding narrative images of “this is that”²⁹ and of “then is now.” The three horizons of baptistic hermeneutics are captured in a motto: “the [storyline of the] church now is [that of] the primitive church and the church on the judgment day [is the church now].”³⁰ Baptistic visionary hermeneutics may be even further defined as

the way the Bible is read by those who (1) accept the plain sense of Scripture as its dominant sense and recognize their continuity with the story it tells, and who (2) acknowledge that finding the point of that story leads them to its application, and who also (3) see past and present and future linked by a “this is that” and “then is now” vision, a trope of mystical identity binding the story now to the story then, and the story then and now to God’s future yet to come.³¹

Thus, this theological vision is not merely a reading strategy for understanding the Bible. More importantly, the vision provides necessary and sufficient conditions for a way or “*the way*—of Christian existence.” It shows “how a people’s identity is construed by means of narratives that while historically set in another time and place nevertheless display redemptive power in the present time.”³² This identity can be properly defined as a baptistic or congregational way (not to be confused with Congregational Church) of living as a Christian community with an open Bible, ready to follow. The baptistic vision works to keep the community centred not on the story alone, but on Christian discipleship in the world as a people whose lives are to reflect the life of those called to embody the Jesus way. Apart from the biblical “fulfilment” expressions of the operational force of the “this is that”/ “then is now” vision referred to above, an historic example may illustrate the way the vision functions in a Baptist’s daily living:

In 1787 William Carey addressed the [Particular Baptist] Ministers Fraternal of the Northampton (England) Association. He asked those gathered to ponder “whether the command given the apostles to teach all

²⁵ McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, 175-6.

²⁶ Cf. Freeman et al, *Baptist Roots*, 1.

²⁷ Parushev, “Freemad, Mod Rødderne!” (Forward, to the Roots!, in Danish), in “baptist.dk” (Danish Baptists’ monthly magazine), Volume 152:17 (September 23, 2005), 14 (pp. 14-17).

²⁸ McClendon, *Ethics*, 36.

²⁹ The phrase “this is that” refers to the opening words of Peter’s speech in Acts 2:16 (in the wording of KJV) when on the day of Pentecost he recalls the prophet Joel’s vision of the grand Day of the Lord (2:28-32). In Peter’s use, Scriptures are not just a historical record of the past but a living story line disclosing meaning and significance in the present. Similarly the phrase “then is now” reminds us that that the expectation of the end times in Scriptures is not simply information about how things will or ought to come out in some distant future. Biblical eschatological visions have immediacy for here and now.

³⁰ McClendon, *Ethics*, 30; cf. 26-34.

³¹ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 45.

³² McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 33; italics of McClendon.

nations was not binding on all succeeding minister to the end of the world.” Dr. John Ryland Sr., a hyper-Calvinist and respected Baptist leader, is reported to have called Carey an enthusiast and told him to sit down. Carey may have set down, but he did not stop asking the question until he had convinced a group of fellow Baptists (including Andrew Fuller, John Sutcliff, John Rayland Jr., John Fawcett, and Robert Hall Jr.) that the Great Commission was addressed directly to *them*. They were Jesus’ disciples. This is that. Then is now. In 1972 the baptist vision launched a modern missionary effort that sent Carey as its first missionary to India. ... This hermeneutical stance was shared [earlier] by Anabaptists who came to believe that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke directly to them...”³³

This example evidences that baptistic vision serves both as the guiding pattern by which baptistic communities shape their thought and practice and as a prophetic corrective to those thought and practices. By that the vision provides necessary and sufficient scope for an authentic baptistic theology to take shape. I will turn now to consider the next term, “theology” in the title of this presentation.

Baptist understanding of the nature of the theological task. Measured by the scholastic standards of the university faculties of theology, which have been developed to satisfy their own academic ends, one may be puzzled whether the Baptists have written anything uniquely Baptist that deserves specific academic consideration.³⁴ Baptists do engage academic theology. One may list a number of Baptist who has written first class biblical, historical, systematic and mission theologies. But when they do, as Dr Paul S Fiddes, a Baptist professor in the faculty of theology at Oxford University notices, they “have always resisted the idea that there is a distinctively ‘Baptist theology,’ at least in terms of there being a Baptist version of such basic doctrines as Trinity, Christology, anthropology and eschatology ... [Baptist scholars] think of themselves as simply contributing to a common storehouse alongside other Christian theologians.”³⁵ They accept the rationality and the intellectual rigor of the theological task. For example, in their comprehensive collection of essays of baptistic writings, Freeman, McClendon and da Silva-Ewell noticed that in search for distinctive features of Baptist doctrinal theology, John Quincy Adams,³⁶ Timothy George and David Dockery³⁷ among others “called attention to the similarity of Baptist doctrines with Reformed theology on such themes as the authority of Scriptures, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the kingdom of God, but they maintained that Baptists carried forward the reform of the church, which the Reformation only began.”³⁸

On the other side, Christian (and any other) theology must always embrace a wrestling with the need and the pitfalls of contextualised faith for there must always be an inseparable link between the faith community (committed to the common life of faith, defined by shared experience and guided by a common vision) and the theology that is *of* and *for* that community. In line with Friedrich Schleiermacher’s judgment, “any given theology must represent and refer to the doctrine of some particular Christian body at some particular time.” In other words, theology

³³ Freeman et al, *Baptist Roots*, 7.

³⁴ Reflections on and response to this puzzlement can be found in McClendon, “What Is A ‘baptist’ Theology?” Cf. *Ethics*, Ch. One.

³⁵ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 3.

³⁶ *Baptists: The Only Thorough Religious Reformers* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005; originally published in 1876).

³⁷ Editors, *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

³⁸ Freeman et al, *Baptist Roots*, 5.

must have a distinct “community of reference,”³⁹ that is to say the theological task is legitimately contextual and pluralistic. For a faith community to live an organic life, its ecclesial distinctiveness should be evident and expressed theologically in one way or another. If there is “the Baptist way of *being* the church,”⁴⁰ as I have argued earlier, there must be a Baptist way of *doing* theology.⁴¹ A personhood, ‘a being’, the character, of a person or a community or a family of communities, is inevitably manifested in doing, for “[The] character is paradoxically both the cause and the effect of what we do.”⁴²

Baptists do have a shared faith story and they should have a distinctive voice among the many Christian ways of legitimately theologising: Baptist theology is a theology which draws upon the fabric of the community’s narrative life, discovering “... traces of theology which appears only in the context of community.”⁴³ For baptistic theologising the narrative dimension of the theological task is both necessary and appreciated. What is then distinctive about the form if not the content of a baptistic way of approaching the theological task?

Theological discourse can be imposed top down by the practitioners of academic theology. It can also be initiated from below as a form of *ad hoc* theologising. The latter is the preferred baptistic theological paradigm. The vector of theological reflections points from the primary or lived out theology of a community of faith to second-order theology of critical reflections upon the community’s experience with God and that community’s practices:⁴⁴

³⁹ Idem, *Ethics*, 18, 19; cf. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1968), 88-93.

⁴⁰ Nigel G Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1991); cf. the sequel, *New Baptist New Agenda* (Carlisle : Paternoster Press, 2002).

⁴¹ A play of words on the title of the third and last booklet in a series edited by the principals of four English Baptist Colleges during the past decade: Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard L. Kidd and Michael Quicke, eds., *Doing Theology in a Baptist way* (Oxford : Whitley Publications, 2000). They are appended with a list of papers presented at the Consultations in Regent’s Park College, Oxford in 1996, 1997, 1999, cf. Idem, *On the way of trust* (Ibid., 1997) and *Something to declare : a study of the declaration of principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Ibid., 1996).

⁴² James Wm McClendon, Jr, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990, 1974), 16.

⁴³ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 3.

⁴⁴ Parush R Parushev, “Theology for the Church: A Convictional Perspective on Community’s Theological Discourse,” plenary paper at IBTS Directors’ Conference *The Dynamics of Primary and Secondary Theologies in Baptist Communities* August 24-28 2004, Prague, Czech Republic (forthcoming). The dynamics of bottom up and top down theologising is revealed in the way the church is defined or how it is thought to come into being. For example, mainstream reformers would identify the church as existing wherever the ministry of Word and sacrament is faithfully carried out. Now clearly that requires a congregation the definition of which starts with the ordained ministry. By contrast Baptists would consider that the church is brought into being as women and men tune to God in believing faith. In this view the church is defined from the bottom up from the act of faith as Christ draws people into living faith. This point was forcefully made by The Revd Dr W Morris S West in discussions about Believers and Infant baptism between representatives of the BWA and of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC (in Louisville, Kentucky, April 1979) where the issue becomes rather clearly demarked: faith that creates the church and the church that accepts those yet to believe in the reverent hope that this will happen. West writes: “It may be argued that those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believers [sic] baptism start from different “models” of the church. Those practicing infant baptism see the Church as an ontologically given community into which a child is incorporated, whereas Baptists and those practising [sic] believer’s baptism, view the Church as a community which is constituted by the activity of God on the individual who responds consciously and believes and so becomes a participating member of the community.” (“Towards a Consensus on Baptism? Louisville 1979,” *The*

The church teaches in many modes—by the visible life of its members as well as by the preached [or enacted] word, by the welcome it extends (or does not extend) to human beings in all their racial, cultural, sexual variety as well as by the hymns it sings and the door-to-door witness it bears, by the presence it affords the defeated and despairing as well as by the generosity it extends to the down-and-out—and not least by classroom instructions of members and inquirers young and old.... Doctrine is not manufactured by theologians to be marketed by churches or pastors. It is the church that must (and does!) ask questions and seeks answers. So doctrine (the church *teaching*) is the first-order task; doctrinal *theology* is necessarily second-order.⁴⁵

Considering the vector of baptistic theology-in-community, expressed in community convictions of being and doing, the task of academic theology for Baptists (and others) can be defined as a science of convictions, aimed at “the discovery, examination and transformation of the conviction set of a given convictional community; carried on with a view to discovering and modifying the relation of the member convictions to one another and ... to whatever else there is.”⁴⁶ Convictions, here understood are a class of formative beliefs that make us who we are personally and corporately. Convictions are shared properties and stand for persistent beliefs “such that if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and it cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before.”⁴⁷

One can readily name a cluster of widely shared baptistic convictions and discern some distinctive ways in which Baptist particularly have held them together in the worship activities and practices of their local assemblies by addressing the gospel of the Triune God in a particular place and time. Some have already been mentioned and can be summarised (and not exhausted) by beliefs in the voluntary association⁴⁸ of believers in gathering communities; believers’ baptism; the final authority of Christ in matters of personal and congregational life, including discipleship and concern for the mutual welfare of all the members; the priesthood of all believers; religious freedom and the like. One may also find a particular baptistic way of fitting communal life and theological convictions together in eucharistic gathering for discernment of the mind of Christ and covenanted relationship of living together under God’s eternal covenant of grace.⁴⁹ The baptistic way of theologising is a convictional one. As stated above it attempts to describe the commonly hold set of convictions, to understand them by interpreting their

Baptist Quarterly, Vol. XXVIII, No. 5 (January 1980), 227 (pp. 225-232)). I am in debt to Prof Briggs for pointing me to this discussion.

⁴⁵ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 23-4; italics of McClendon.

⁴⁶ McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, 184.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁸ The idea of voluntarism of baptistic associating has to be handled with care. It does not imply that the members of the local community are free as in a voluntary club to set whatever terms of communion they choose because they accept that they are under the Lordship of Christ, constrained by covenant requirements and in relation of interdependency or sisterhood with other gathering communities. Voluntarism points to the fact that members of the local congregations are not coerced by the magistrate or state legislation in gathering and expressing their faith.

⁴⁹ Jones, *A Believing Church* and his *A Shared Meal and a Common Table: Some Reflections on Lord’s Supper and Baptists*, The Whitley Lecture 1999, forwarded by Brian Haymes (Oxford: Whitley Publication, 1999); cf. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, chapters 1 and 2; Stanley J Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994); Brian Haymes, “Theology and Baptist Identity,” in Fiddes et al., eds., *Doing theology in a Baptist way*, 1-5; McClendon, *Ethics*, chapter 1; Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda*, chapter 1 and *Free Church, Free State*, chapter 3. The language of covenant is used explicitly by the Calvinist Baptist and the concept is applied in one form or another by the baptistic communities at large.

emergence and sustenance through the practices of communal living over a period of time and to critically examine, if necessary revised them in relation to one another and to other sets of beliefs. Being by nature a theology in and for a community,⁵⁰ it is reflecting critically on commonly shared communal convictions and its task is both a descriptive and a normative one. Baptist theologians are regularly “theologians-in-community” engaged in convictional work for which “self-involvement is natural and appropriate.” At the same time, being “theologians-in-dialogue” their critical and constructive disengagement from the life of the community if necessary “requires to be explained case by case.”⁵¹

Testing the case of Baptist particularity. There is left one more element to be considered in the title of the presentation – the “a”. The use of the indefinite article is deliberate and, in my use of it (which may not necessarily be evident in the way English grammar works) signifies ambiguity. It refers to the fact that there is no commonly agreed doctrinal or any other theological system that all Baptists would hold together. While several Baptists have come to prominence in ecumenical circles,⁵² Baptist bodies or communities are quite uneven in their attitudes and participation in the major ecumenical assemblies⁵³ and for very good reason: they cannot represent a binding ecclesial consensus of any sort, apart from the perspective of a Baptist association and at best-a kind of a Baptist’s theology,⁵⁴ a compendium of the thoughts of some individual theologians.

As with the notion of voluntarism earlier, a note of caution is needed in regard to baptistic particularity. Too much stress on the individual theologian tends to privatise theology and obscure the corporate dimension of baptistic theologising, or at least to distance second-order theology too much from the place where primary theology is being worked out. Any authentic baptistic theology has to work at the level of acceptability in the local congregation. The baptistic family is not synodical but congregational and associative thus the vector of authority, as pointed earlier, is from the local to the regional to the national and beyond, and not vice versa, as if they had some para-catholic ecclesiology, whereby the Baptist World Alliance or European Baptist Federation determined the theology of the local church and handed it down through national union and regional association. The important thing is the direction of travel – the local faith community may seek the wisdom of others either individually or in association but it is only that that they receive, an advice not commands. The local congregation may covenant away to a larger body responsibilities for aspects of mission, ministerial formation or education. For example, this they do by contributing to central funds for mission abroad, for cooperative development of quality educational programmes or for the support of ministry at home when the local congregation cannot do that, and commissioning headquarters staff to undertake certain

⁵⁰ A play of words on being a [lived out] theology in a community that gives life-witness to what the community believes rather than doing theology in a community, similar to being a church rather than doing a church. See Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002).

⁵¹ McClendon, *Ethics*, 38-39.

⁵² E.g. Ian M. Randall lists several Baptist leaders in UK active in the World Council of Churches (such as Simon Oxley, John Briggs), the Conference of European Churches (such as Keith Clements [and later Darrell Jackson]) and Churches Together in England (such as Roger Nunn, Hugh Cross, Gethin Abraham-Williams, David Goodbourn) in his *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot, UK: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005), 491 ff.

⁵³ For a recent account on the involvement of the unions and associations of the European Baptist Federation in the organised ecumenical life, see Keith G Jones “The European Baptist Federation,” chapters 3 and 7.

⁵⁴ Cf. R. Wayne Stacy, ed., *A Baptist’s Theology* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), v-x.

tasks on congregations' behalf which very often could not be done by even a large local congregation. Whilst larger bodies cannot coerce a local congregation in matters of faith and practice it is also true that those bodies can withdraw fellowship if the primary theology of that congregation is deemed heterodox or if the congregational minister's behaviour is deemed scandalous, or the local congregation's life detrimental to the good name of other associated communities,⁵⁵ and vice versa local congregations can and do withdraw from the larger body when it does not seem to represent their theological understanding,⁵⁶ e.g. in participating in ecumenical activity.

This situation may be adjudged as the liability of a baptistic way of theologising. And yet as has been argued earlier, there are marks of robust identity that are the common property of diverse baptistic communities with which Baptists would readily identify. Conversely, the plurality of baptistic convictional theologies can be assessed as complementary pneumatological expressions of theologies gripping with the immanence of God in the life of communities or in the ontic actuality of God's presence.⁵⁷

The viability of a distinctively baptistic way of doing theology has been first set out in the works of the late theologians James Wm. McClendon, Jr—a Baptist—and John Howard Yoder—a Mennonite. The probing goes further by theologians on both sides of the Atlantic. I have referred to a set of field surveys of Baptist theological identity among communities in Eastern and Central Europe undertaken by a team of the International Baptist Theological Seminary of the European Baptist Federation in Prague. The surveys seem to fit into a larger project of furthering the development of the notion of a baptistic way of doing theology for a gathering community of convictional, intentional believers. The surveys have helped us see what is meant by a 'baptistic' approach to what is regarded here as primary theology (the theology *done in* such gathering convictional communities) and what it might mean to speak of *a contextual theology* for these communities. Thus, the surveys contributed to a way of doing baptistic theology itself, which might be clarified under the following headings:⁵⁸

1. Theology as a *description of identity* (located in historical gathering, intentional, convictional communities)
2. Theology as *dialogue* (a process; interpersonal; contextual)
3. Theology as *inter-community exhortation* (not isolationist, yet not seeking agreement by abstractions, by generalisations; dialogue leads to concrete exhortation--whether a warning or encouragement;

⁵⁵ An infamous example is heavy shepherding being perceived to destroy the unity of the faith family.

⁵⁶ As exemplified by the recent withdrawal of the Southern Baptist Convention (USA) from the fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance.

⁵⁷ The term ontic actuality of God is coined by James G M Purves to complement the propositional ways of expressing God's immanence. He insists that the primary means of God communicating His present reality to a believer and a faith community cannot to be understood by propositional language alone. Believers can only apprehend God in so far as He comes to them or actualises His own Being towards them. The ontic actuality of God denotes the becomingness of God towards believers in His own Being. God is known and met with by them through His ontic actuality. See his *The Triune God and the Charismatic Movement: A Critical Appraisal of Trinitarian Theology and Charismatic Experience from a Scottish Perspective*, forward by Parush R Parushev (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004), chapters 1 and 8.

⁵⁸ Wesley Brown, Rollin Grams, Keith G Jones, Parush Parushev, and Peter Penner, "Towards a 'baptistic' Contextual Theology," in Grams and Parushev, eds., *Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity*, 175-181.

- dialogue reaches beyond the immediate context and specific community to other communities in other contexts)
4. Theology as *listening* (hearing also from those who do not have control over the communication of theology; hearing not just ideas but [reflections] from such communities' own living [out] of the faith in their contexts)
 5. Theology as *Scriptural interpretation* (exegetical, canonical, and as an ongoing process of Scriptural interpretation rather than becoming based on assured results of past interpretation; theology entails continuous interpretation of Biblical texts and Biblical theology as an exercise of the believing communities as they come to possess their own reading of the Scriptures; it is not a distillation of the text in a system but a living with and within the text)
 6. Theology as *missional* (with ministry and missions as primary tasks of theology rather than as mere application of theological ideas)
 7. Theology as *communal* (responding to the life situation of the churches in their contexts and involving theologising together rather than individuals producing their own theological conclusions in a theoretical way)
 8. Theology as *Biblical practice* (seeking to walk in the way of the Lord as revealed in Scripture and being guided in our walk by the vision of the Kingdom Jesus has proclaimed and lived that we might follow Him)⁵⁹

Conclusion. In this paper I have suggested that there is a distinct way of doing theology - a baptistic way that corresponds to the Baptist way of being a Christian community. The argument of this paper proceeded by, firstly defining the subject of theological the enquiry – the Baptists as an integral part of a wider baptistic family of ecclesial communities. I looked at the marks of baptistic identity recognised in the works of Baptist theologians and historians. Next, I considered a hermeneutical perspective – the baptist vision, as the hermeneutical key which aligns congregational life with the biblical story, a story which both formed and still forms the pattern of baptistic thought and practice. Furthermore, I looked at convictions shaped by shared life in gathering intentional communities and thereby becoming the primary source for authentic convictional theologising. Finally, I looked at the particularity of the Baptist ways of life as a contribution to the development of baptistic contextual theologies having the embodied religious experience of communities as their point of departure.

⁵⁹ Prof Briggs pointed to me that many of the older Baptist covenants reflected the language of the farewell sermon of the early Congregationalist, John Robinson, to the Pilgrims leaving Holland (for sailing on *Mayflower* to New England in July 1620), resonating with this point by referring to 'the Lord had more truth and light yet to breake forth out of his holy Word' (see *Words of John Robinson. Robinson's Farewell Address to the Pilgrims upon their Departure from Holland, 1620 (and other sermons)* on the account of Edward Winslow in his "Hypocrisie Unmasked," printed In 1646 (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1903), available electronically at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/>, last accessed on March 22 2009). This line lies behind the chorus of the popular hymn "We limit not the truth of God" which states 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word.' This again suggests that alongside the doctrinal there must always be an experiential or existential dimension to baptistic theological reflection, for there must always be the possibility of theology as encounter: Encountering the living Christ however this may be done, - in vision, at the communion table, in the life of his poor as in Leo Tolstoy's short novel *Where love is, God is (Gde lyubov', tam i bog*, 1885) or more biblically in the parable of the Last Judgment (Rom 14:10) or of the Great Assize famously preached by John Wesley (Sermon 15 in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, text of the 1872 four volume edition edited by Thomas Jackson, full text available through Calvin College CD collection *Christian Classics Eternal Library* on at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.xv.html>]). A Christian who has never encountered risen Christ is a very deprived believer indeed.

I would like to conclude my presentation today with words of hope. In the 400th jubilee year of the Baptist beginnings and in the place known for its the high regard for free thinking and unrestrained intellectual pursuits, it is my and my colleagues at IBTS and EBF heart-felt desire to see the Baptisten Seminarium fully integrated into the intellectual life of the academic community of the Free University. It is also our hope to find the Baptists of the Netherlands, represented vicariously by the studious work of the seminary faculty and students, regaining their rightful place and adding their unique voice to the ecumenical theological discourse on crucial and mundane issues of the contemporary embodiment of the great vision of Jesus the Christ.