

Doing Theology in a Baptist Way
Do Baptists have an ecclesial theological reality or are they simply a
cultural divergence within mainstream "Reformatical" and
evangelical Christianity?

- door dr. Keith Jones

Professor Dr. Kees van der Kooi in his stimulating response to my colleague, the Revd docent Dr. Parush R. Parushev and his paper on 'Doing Theology in a Baptist Way,' raises trenchant comments about whether it is right to press the argument that there is a stream of Christian believing and being which is neither catholic/orthodox nor, to use the preferred phrase of Professor van der Kooi, 'reformatical.'¹

This area of debate is not without significance to all of the parties: those who belong to the churches reformed under the protection of Kings and Princes (Lutheran and Anglican); those of the magisterial reformations in the cities led by Zwingli, then later Calvin, Bullinger, Knox and others (Reformed); and those of us who belong to what Lesslie Newbigin called the 'pneumatic churches,'² or as I prefer, the 'gathering churches.'³ These churches, so I would argue, emerged out of what is sometimes described as the radical reformation.⁴ Whether the church families of this radical reformation stream are simply a sub-group sociological type, as Professor van der Kooi argues,⁵ or whether, as I would claim in support of Dr. Parushev, our ecclesiology is, indeed, 'another distinct stream' has to be judged by ecclesial communities themselves as evidence is presented.

Baptists, according to the Baptist historian W. T. Whitley, start not with believer's baptism as a point of theological expression, but with ecclesiology.⁶ It is this insistence that an *ekklesia* (church) is a gathering, intentional, convictional community interdependent with other like-minded communities⁷ which develops the possibility that this manifestation of Christianity has its own theological rationale over against Lutheran, Reformed, Waldensian, Hussite, Methodist or Anglican expressions of the church.

In contemporary Europe and in the light of ecumenical dialogue, this can be illustrated most powerfully by the search amongst mainstream Protestant/Reformatical traditions to discover common ground, theological unity and ecclesial identity. The churches of what I will, for purposes of

¹ See further his 'A Reformed response to "the Baptist way,"' p. 2.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 88.

³ Keith G. Jones, 'Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*,' *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4.2 (January 2004), p. 5-13.

⁴ G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

⁵ See further his 'A Reformed response to "the Baptist way,"' p. 2.

⁶ W. T. Whitley *A History of British Baptists*, rev. ed. (London: Kingsgate, 1932), p. 4.

⁷ For a further exposition of these ideas see Keith G. Jones *The European Baptist Federation: A Case Study in European Baptist Interdependency 1950 - 2006* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009), especially p. 1-60.

identity, describe as the magisterial and mainstream reformation have engaged in theological dialogue and discourse for over thirty years in the search for what has come to be expressed as a theological goal of 'church fellowship' in what is now called the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). This search has had the aim of creating a pan-European Protestant body and has been developed around the very notion of substantial ecclesial common ground which it seems Professor van der Kooi wants to describe as one main 'river to the tradition of the Reformation.' Indeed, CPCE currently embraces over 98 ecclesial communities or 'churches' throughout Europe, and beyond that in Argentina and Uruguay. They include classic Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, Lutheran Churches, Methodist Churches, the Hussite Church in the Czech Republic, the Czech Brethren and Unitas Fratrum, churches of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine, Czech Evangelical Brethren, the Waldensian Church in Italy, 'union' churches (Congregational and Presbyterian or Lutheran and Reformed) and Congregational unions.⁸ Thus, the definition of 'Protestant' is very wide and encompasses churches reflecting proto-reformation life such as the Waldensian Church in Italy, those seeking to bear witness to a pre-reformation tradition such as the Hussite Church, and those churches rooted in events of the evangelical revival under John and Charles Wesley. So, if all these churches can be seen as enjoying 'church fellowship' as defined by CPCE, then it is not a narrow, but quite expansive ecclesial definition. The Leuenberg Agreement declares a common understanding of the Gospel overcoming the 'icy looks' exchanged between the Lutherans and the Reformed in the 1500's.⁹ 'Church fellowship' is defined in the following terms:

'On the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible cooperation in witness and service to the world.'¹⁰

From this it follows that those enjoying this church fellowship no longer hold to the historic condemnations of each other expressed in earlier doctrinal statements. They accord to each other table and pulpit fellowship and indeed go so far as to declare mutual recognition of ordination and the freedom to provide for intercelebration of the sacraments.¹¹ This is a clear admission of an ecclesial reality as a community of Protestant Christian churches arising out of the classic reformation of the 1500s but not so narrow as to refuse to embrace a pre-reformation foundation such as the Waldensian Church Methodist churches coming out of the Anglican Episcopal Church in the late 1700s, and the Hussite Church created by liberal Czechoslovak Catholics in 1920. However, the European Baptist Federation has been rejected from

⁸ For a complete list see <http://www.leuenberg.net/>. Accessed 24/06/2009.

⁹ On this see Wilhelm Hüffmeier, 'The Leuenberg Agreement – Its Development and Content' in *Leuenberg, Meissen and Porvo*, (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Lembeck, 1996), p. 80-86.

¹⁰ *Agreement between Reformation Churches in Europe (Leuenberg Agreement)*, (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Lembeck, 1973), p. 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

participation in this community of 'protestant' or 'reformatical'¹² churches. So, this must be on more serious grounds than geographical spread if churches in South America can belong, or even deep cultural and sociological factors if Hussites and Methodists can participate. The root must be discovered in something deeper, more theological and ecclesial, which would substantiate the argument of this short paper that Baptists belong to this different 'gathering church' stream of life and are not simply a sub-set sociologically of the protestant/reformatory family.

There was a serious attempt to search for a common theology of ecclesiology which might have led to 'church fellowship' between 2000 and 2005. Much common ground was found in the articulation of Christian belief and doctrine, and a report of the dialogue was produced.¹³ The joint group proposed to both the CPCE Assembly in 2006 and European Baptist Federation Council that it might prove possible to address the historic 'anathemas' against the so-called re-baptizers and to find a way of including European Baptist ecclesial communities within the notion of 'church fellowship' – that is, sharing a common understanding of the Gospel, preaching, practice of the Eucharist and mutual recognition of those ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, the CPCE Assembly decided Baptists could not be included, even under special terms.

Thus, the 'family' of protestant/reformed and proto-reformation churches in Europe have themselves declared 'gathering' baptistic churches to be out with the 'church' as defined by the Leuenberg Agreement. This recognition of the distinct 'otherness' of Baptists over against churches of a congregational, synodical, methodistical and episcopal ecclesiology must be acknowledged as more than sociological. It is indeed, at heart, theological.

At present, it seems only possible for CPCE churches and Baptist churches to find a common home within the Conference of European Churches (CEC) together with Anglican Episcopalians and Orthodox Churches. Here, it is clear, there are, as my colleague Dr Parushev argued, the distinct 'families' of churches – Orthodox, Protestant and Gathering. The Roman Catholic Church is then encountered in the relationships between CEC and the conference of Roman Catholic bishops in Europe (CCEE) or in the occasional wider European Ecumenical Assemblies (EEA).

Keith G Jones
Prague
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¹² A title preferred by Professor van der Kooi.

¹³ *Dialogue between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Lembeck, 2005).