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EATING FORBIDDEN FOOD: PETER, BAPTIST POLITY, AND ENGAGING WITH CULTURE

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Introduction

In this paper, I argue that at the heart of Baptist polity is a practice that has the theological potential to enable congregations to engage the unknown future of post-Christendom cultural change positively. That is, to borrow and adapt what I once heard from Barbara G. Wheeler, then President of Auburn Theological Seminary, I am reaching into the "purse" of the Baptist tradition to address the current cultural context.

To say I am writing this paper from a Baptist perspective does not mean, however, that I want to be sectarian. Instead, I offer this as a specific contribution to the broader ecumenical conversations on what it means to be Church, post-Christendom. I am not claiming that Baptist is the only or necessarily the best Christian grouping. I am instead merely claiming that Baptists are the people to whom I have made my Christian ecclesiological commitments as a member, ordained minister, and theological educator. It is only from that position I can make a specific contribution to the table of ideas allowing for mutual conversation, discussion, enrichment, and correction.

I am also aware some might regard a denominational stance[1] for engaging with culture ironically archaic. Denominationalism can be seen as being as "post-" as "Christendom" itself.[2] Yet,

1. Some Baptists are reluctant to describe themselves as a "denomination" and structurally the very nature of Baptist ecclesiology resists centralized, hierarchical, institutionalism.

2. Noel, *Pentecostalism*, 7.

whatever post-denominationalism means, self-identifying groupings of churches, including Baptists, continue to represent, if even only in name, the ecclesiological bodies with which large numbers of Christians still identify. I am not, therefore, seeking to defend denominationalism. I am rather exploring the way in which a particular self-identifying theological tradition has the resources within its polity to engage meaningfully and missionally with culture.

My Baptist perspective has been formed in a particular geographical context. My membership, pastoral ministry, and role as a theological educator have primarily been in a British, specifically Scottish context. Before relocating to Canada, however, I worked and lived in Amsterdam for three years. I was the Rector of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, a European based International Baptist Centre that supports PhD research. It is, therefore, only since September 2017 that I have made my ecclesiological home among Canadian Baptists, specifically the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada (CBAC). Indeed, a form of this paper was first presented at the "Oasis Forum" of the CBAC on Thursday 23 August 2018 in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. This said, the work of James Wm. McClendon Jr., a Baptist theologian and ethicist from the USA, has also influenced my Baptist understanding.

In this paper I argue that the "Church Meeting," which plays a central formal role in the purse of Baptist ecclesiology, can enable congregations to engage with post-Christendom culture. For this to happen, however, there will need to be an explicit appropriation of that practice as a theological event of discernment. To make this argument, I first of all highlight something of the current cultural context in which Canadian Baptist congregations along with other Christian believers now live. Second, I focus on the transitional events recorded in Acts 10:1—11:18, which saw the early Christian Church make a significant cultural turn in relation to the gentiles. Third, I argue that congregational gatherings intended to discern the way and will of Jesus Christ offer a context for local missional and meaningful engagement with culture.

Current Cultural Context

One of the popular books promoted at the time of the CBAC Oasis event in 2018 was *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*.[3] The author, Tod Bolsinger, states the book is based on five vital lessons. The first is: "Understanding Uncharted Territory: The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you."[4] Bolsinger is alluding to the new cultural context in which Christians find themselves and which various authors describe as "post" or "after" Christendom.[5] Bolsinger writes we are now living after the "seventeen-hundred-year-long era which had Christianity at the privileged center of Western cultural life."[6] This was an era in which the Ten Commandments were taught in school, national newspapers gave considerable coverage to Church events and Christian values, and if you were missing from Church on a Sunday someone would ask you about it at work on a Monday.[7] While Bolsinger presents history here in very general and popular terms, he captures the image of a previous era in a way with which some people can identify. This era, however, imagined and real, has passed.

Whether post-Christendom is the best term to describe the current religious and cultural context in Canada is open to debate. My primary knowledge of the term has been through the work of author Stuart Murray Williams, the Anabaptist network in the UK, and the "After Christendom" series of publications.[8] There the focus has been on the European context.[9] It may be that in Canada, as indeed in Europe, the meaning needs greater clarification concerning other terms as "post-Christian" and

3. Bolsinger, *Canoeing*.
4. Bolsinger, *Canoeing*, 14.
5. Bolsinger, *Canoeing*, 34.
6. Bolsinger, *Canoeing*, 11.
7. Bolsinger, *Canoeing*, 11.
8. The second edition of Stuart Murray's influential book, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* has recently been published (2018).
9. Murray recognizes this (*Post-Christendom*, 23).

"post-modern."[10] Be this as it may, it is a term that according to the McMaster Divinity College Centre for Post-Christendom Studies allows for discussion, among other things, around "the rise of secularization, religious pluralism, and multiculturalism in western countries over the past sixty years."[11] Presented in this way with the accompanying language of "persecution" and "marginalization" the term is framed largely in negative terms. This emphasis perhaps hides the critique of Christendom apparent in some discussions, not least those of Murray, who sees the fall of Christendom as something to be "celebrated."[12] This is said even as Murray acknowledges, "post-Christendom is not an easy environment for discipleship, mission, or church."[13] As a consequence, the description from the Centre for Post-Christendom Studies is helpful to allow discussion on the situation.

Several responses to this current cultural context are possible. One is denial. Murray states, "Our response to the challenges it presents may be to burrow ostrich-like into the remaining sand of familiar church culture, scan the horizon for growing churches that claim we can continue doing what we have always done, or clutch desperately at promises of revival or programs that promise to restore our fortunes."[14] Writing as early as 1998 about the "Post-Christian West," Michael Riddell puts it more bluntly: "The Christian church is dying in the West. The painful fact is the cause of a great deal of avoidance by the Christian community. To use terminology from pastoral care, the terminally sick patient is somewhat between denial and bargaining."[15]

Another possible response to post-Christendom is anger. This is apparent for example in Christian responses to "the federal government's Canada Summer Jobs program."[16] Claims of persecution can accompany such anger. David Millard Haskell

10. Paas, "Post-Christian," 3–25.
11. McMaster Divinity College Centre for Post-Christendom Studies, "PCS Journal."
12. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 23.
13. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 23.
14. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 22–23.
15. Riddell, *Threshold*, 1.
16. Burgess, "Churches upset"; Haskell, "Trudeau is asking."

writes, "Thousands of years ago, before Christians could practice their faith legally, they often faced persecution from the Roman government."[17] This said, he acknowledges that things are not the same when he writes, "In this contemporary case, though, it's a bit of money—not their lives—hanging in the balance."[18] The qualitative difference of the experienced persecution should be noted. This does not mean, however, that all Christian concerns about government bias or the anger which loss can create are necessarily petty or irrelevant.

A third possible response is a missional engagement. Riddell writes, "In this setting, missionary orientation is the sole alternative to a lingering death."[19] The necessity and urgency for such a response are evident in the activities of the CBAC. The 2018 CBAC "Oasis" event was billed as the "The Turning Point." Attendees were told: "This is a defining moment in our history as a family of churches. The choices we make now will have ripple effects for generations to come. We have an opportunity to reshape our future now."[20] The leaders actively encouraged the development of 65 New Congregations, 300 Mission-edge neighborhood churches, 75 emerging pastor-leaders (150 new pastor-leaders in total), all with the ultimate goal of seeing 3000 baptisms in a year by 2025. Oasis was in turn followed by a "Mission Edge Conference" in October 2018.

Such missional engagement, however, is far from straightforward. At a macro level, it requires mission to be carried out "within a contested environment."[21] At the micro level of the local congregation, there are critical issues of finances, resources, personnel, and specific neighbourhood contextuality. As the cultural world we inhabit drifts away from us, and as crisis-driven activity wearies, it is possible that at a congregational level we might find ourselves more lost in space than ready to boldly go where no one has gone before.

17. Haskell, "Trudeau is asking."
18. Haskell, "Trudeau is asking."
19. Riddell, *Threshold*, 13.
20. Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, "Oasis, 2018."
21. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 22.

The Turn to Scripture: Acts 10:1—11:18

While Riddell announces the imminent death of the Christian Church in the West, he is not entirely convinced all is lost. Instead, he argues that to go forward we need to go back to the missionary life of the early Church and specifically the episode recorded in Acts 10:1—11:18, which is "commonly regarded as the beginning of the mission to the gentiles."[22] This text offers "encouragement" in the "tension between faithfulness and relevance" as "all the old certainties seem to be stripped away."[23]

The explicit move to Scripture is appropriate if not necessary in a Baptist theological approach to how the church responds to the changed post-Christendom culture. British Baptist theologian Nigel Wright begins his book on Church-State relations writing: "We rightly look to Scripture to understand the will of God for the ordering of the Christian community."[24] The claim is not that only Baptists consider the Scripture to have authority, but rather that Baptists have a particular way of approaching the Bible, and not least the New Testament, as "the liberating and enlivening source of authority for Christian faith and practice."[25] Baptist theologian, James Wm. McClendon Jr. offers a particular way of approaching this matter. He claims that to be "baptist" is to have a particular way of understanding the Scripture.[26] He calls this the "baptist vision." By this vision he means, "the guiding pattern by which a people (or as here, a combination of peoples) shape their thought and practice as that people or that combination; I mean by it the continually emerging theme and tonic structure of their common life."[27] McClendon argues that this vision is a "hermeneutical principle," where people have "a shared awareness of the present Christian community as the

22. Riddell, *Threshold*, 15–16.
23. Riddell, *Threshold*, 16.
24. Wright, *Free Church*, 2.
25. Wright, *Free Church*, 1.
26. McClendon, *Ethics*, 20. McClendon advances the term "baptist" to include others who may not be denominationally Baptist but live by the same vision.
27. McClendon, *Ethics*, 20.

primitive community and the eschatological community."[28] He argues, therefore, that the church now "*is*" the primitive apostolic church in some "mystical" and "immediate" sense that is "better understood by the artist and poet than the metaphysician or dogmatist."[29] Significantly, however, he maintains it is the Scriptures read and interpreted that "effects" that link between the church of the apostles and the church now.[30] With reference to Acts 2, McClendon speaks of a "*this is that*" connection between the church now and the church in Scripture.[31] Thus, while eschewing both extreme fundamentalist or liberal views, McClendon argues that Scripture is read and interpreted in baptist communities in such a way as to shape beliefs and practice.[32] It is, therefore, an internally consistent feature of a Baptist theological response to turn to Scripture to inform and guide practice.

To turn to the book of Acts in turning to Scripture is also appropriate as it is "the only book in the Bible that records the story of the early Church" and as such "holds a prominent place in any assessment of the biblical basis for ecclesial faith and practice."[33] More specifically, "The book of Acts is the great text of mission. In this Lucan compilation of oral history, we hear the stories of how a localized Jewish sectarian movement became spread throughout the known world."[34] For this to happen, however, the early Church had to make a significant cultural adaptation with the early Jewish believers accepting that Gentiles could become Christian believers as Gentiles. Luke records this shift, and the reasons for it in the seven-act drama of Acts 10:1—11:18.[35] There we read of the encounter between the apostle Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius, and the response of the early Church to what transpired. These verses constitute the most extended single narrative in the book of Acts. The length

28. McClendon, *Ethics*, 23.
29. McClendon, Ethics, 24.
30. McClendon, *Ethics*, 23.
31. McClendon, *Ethics*, 25.
32. McClendon, *Ethics*, 23.
33. Barr et al., eds., *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2.
34. Riddell, *Threshold*, 17.
35. Willimon, *Acts*, 95.

reinforces the significance of the content.[36] As with Riddell, British missiologist, David Smith highlights these verses as offering a New Testament "biblical model" for "Mission after Christendom."[37] From this perspective, I will draw attention to a number of the features of this event.

Forbidden Food

In this drama, God in a vision encourages Peter to kill and eat food which, according to the Law of Moses as expressed in Lev 11, was ritually unclean.[38] This happens three times. Three times, Peter refuses "in no uncertain terms," asserting his purity on this matter.[39] After some reflection, however, Peter correctly discerns the meaning of the vision. He discerns it is not just about food, but about social relations and the tendency in social relations, here a tendency supported by religious convictions, to treat certain people as profane, unclean, and unacceptable.[40] Thus, when he arrives at Cornelius' house, we get his correct interpretation of the vision: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (10:28).

To say "food" in these verses was code for social relations is not to say that actual food and the eating of it is not important. The opposite is true because one of the very human ways in which social relations, acceptance, and association are expressed is through eating with people.[41] Food in this story is not metaphorical but material. This is the reason why, when Peter arrives back in Jerusalem, the criticism he faces from circumcised Jewish believers is very specific, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3). Food matters in this story, therefore, because the eating of unclean food involved

36. Pervo, *Acts*, 264.
37. Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, 69–82.
38. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 349–50.
39. Spencer, *Journeying Through Acts*, 121.
40. Spencer stresses the "anthropological," "cultural," and "social" issues at stake beyond the "zoological and gastronomical" (*Journeying*, 121).
41. Spencer, *Journeying*, 121.

going against the law of Moses. It matters because although some engagement with Gentiles was to be expected, sharing food with them was one of the places where the restrictions concerning separation were particularly drawn.[42] Food matters in this story because the willingness to eat forbidden food becomes symbolic of a definite cultural shift in the mission of the early Church. It matters because it reminds us that cultural engagement involves some very human and at times apparently "mundane" acts and actions.[43]

Following on from the above, food matters critically in this story because for Jewish people and indeed Jewish Christians, the rules around clean and unclean food, and by association whom they would eat and not eat with, was one of the ways in which they could keep their identity in an increasingly Gentile culture where it seems that many of their ways and traditions were being lost.[44] It was a matter over which they still had some control and a tangible way in which they could maintain their distinctiveness. The instruction to kill and eat, therefore, was an instruction to embrace what was seen as nothing less than a loss of "self-identity" in a hostile culture.[45] In this story, Peter moves towards this risk. He moves towards it theologically, he moves towards it spatially as he journeys from Joppa to Caesarea, and he moves towards it culturally in the sharing of food.[46]

Perhaps the above captures something of the deep-seated identity issues in play as the Church seeks to respond to the current changing cultural situation. We are seeking to mitigate loss. The very things we might want to keep doing or not doing because they make us distinct may, however, be the very things that are holding back our missional engagement.

42. Pervo, *Acts*, 274.
43. Willimon, *Acts*, 97.
44. Willimon, *Acts*, 96.
45. Bond, "Scripture and Theology," 80–83.
46. Mike Pears discusses the emergence of a new "spatial imagination" in these events. Pears, "Mission and Place," 37–50.

Peter

Peter does not always do so well in the story of Jesus and the early Church. He is a complex character. These verses are not all there is to say on his relationship with gentiles as the church expands (Gal 2). In these verses Peter shifts from "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (10:14) to the position, "But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (10:28). We should not underestimate the human "cognitive dissonance" that can be involved in acknowledging that a former, established, and cherished position no longer applies.[47] This is the case even if Peter has already been on a journey to a new position, perhaps indicated by his staying at the home of Simon the "tanner" (9:43; 10:6, 32), an occupation which would have rendered Simon as "unclean."[48] Cornelius is converted to Christ in this story, but Peter also experiences a conversion, an "ecclesiological" one.[49]

To talk about Peter's conversion, however, is to acknowledge that Peter is actually not the primary actor who drives this story forward. This is a story with angelic visitations, trances, voices from heaven, the disruptive inbreaking of the Holy Spirit, and people speaking in tongues. If that were not enough, this active presence of God is not confined to the young church or the people of Israel but is also evident beyond the church in the experience of Cornelius. To be sure, what gives this account its "marvelous tension" as a narrative "is the process of *human* decision-making as the Church tries to catch up to God's initiative."[50] Yet, "the real 'hero' of the story, the 'star' of the drama is not Peter nor Cornelius but the gracious and prodding One who makes bold promises and keeps them, who finds a way even in the midst of human distinctions and partiality between persons."[51]

47. Walaskay, *Acts*, 104.
48. Spencer, *Journeying*, 123.
49. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 360–61.
50. Johnson and Harrington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 187, emphasis in original.
51. Willimon, *Acts*, 99.

A Christian response based upon a "this is that" association with Scripture cannot avoid the spiritual dimension discussed above as it seeks to engage in a new cultural terrain. The resources upon which the Christian Church draws going forward will need to go beyond bake sales and national strategies. Instead, the type of "messy church" required for renewal may be more about the unexpected, the spiritual, and the supernatural, than paint and snacks.[52] My point is not to disparage missional responses such as "Messy Church" but rather to argue that Acts 10:1—11:18 indicates that such responses on their own are an inadequate response if the enthusiasm and energy spent is not accompanied by something of the power of God expressed not least in and through the operation of the Holy Spirit. To put this differently, in the model of Acts 10:1—11:18, cultural engagement in a new context requires more than sociological analysis and missional strategy but something of the real movement of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon

In Acts 10:34–43, we have Peter's sermon in response to Cornelius' request, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" (10:33). It is a sermon based upon Peter's experience of the risen Christ and the command that the witnesses of his resurrection should proclaim the gospel (10:42). Through this sermon, Cornelius and his household are saved (11:14). The significance of the sermon, however, is not only that it led to the conversion of Cornelius and his household. It is also significant because in it we see how Peter makes his move from, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean," to the position, "But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (10:28).

As reflected in this sermon, the move that Peter makes in his understanding is theological. Peter may well have known the teaching of Jesus as recorded in Mark 7:1–20 regarding food and

52. "Messy Church" is a missional response to the current cultural context. Wycliffe College, "Messy Church Canada."

what made a person unclean, not least because of the association between Peter and Mark's Gospel.[53] Indeed, Luke's Peter offers "a capsule summary of the Jesus story," which some see as congruent with the Gospel of Mark, and others compare with the Gospel of Luke.[54] This said, in Luke's Gospel "controversies over clean and unclean food have not surfaced in Acts until this point and play no major role in Luke's Gospel."[55] Furthermore, Peter has no explicit Hebrew proof text to support his actions.[56] Witherington writes, "It is striking that there are no explicit quotations from the OT in this speech, unlike the speeches in Acts 2–3."[57] What we read, therefore, is a theological statement proclaimed and applied as Peter affirms the value of what Jesus did is for all peoples because he is "Lord of all" (10:36). Peter, therefore, explains his paradigm shift in terms of a Spirit-led working out of what it meant to confess that Jesus is Lord, not only among the Jews but in the world. Willimon writes:

> This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any other basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own, even if we were looking only at Scripture. This does not mean an undisciplined flight of fancy into our own bold new ideas or the pitiful effort to catch the wind of the latest trend in the culture under the guise of seeking new revelation. Rather, it means that we are continuing to penetrate the significance of the scriptural witness that Jesus Christ is Lord and to be faithful to divine prodding.[58]

Peter's sermon, therefore, offers a theological interpretation of the significance of the resurrection for a new cultural context,

53. Williams, *Acts*, 191.
54. Holladay, *Acts*, 238–39.
55. Spencer, *Journeying*, 121.
56. Willimon, *Acts*, 98.
57. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 355.
58. Willimon, *Acts*, 98–99.

and also the nature of Peter's own "conversion" through Spirit-led "reflection."[59]

Church

This narrative is not merely about a shift in the attitude of Peter towards the gentiles, but that of the early Church. The main individual characters are involved in action and reaction with others. When Peter travelled from Joppa to Capernaum some of the believers went with him (10:23). They are later identified as "circumcised believers who had come with Peter," which introduces another as yet undiscussed "identity marker" of the first Christians (10:45–46).[60] These circumcised believers, however, witness with astonishment the gift of the Spirit to the uncircumcised Gentiles (10:45–46). Peter refers to these other believers when answering criticism from the other "circumcised believers" in Jerusalem (11:12). In response, the representatives of the Jerusalem Church move from criticism to praising God for the events that have taken place (11:18). Indeed, the significance of this "Scene Seven" is precisely to demonstrate that the "apostolic Church" "sees here no mere special case, but the fundamental affirmative to the admission of the Gentiles."[61] These verses, therefore, are not merely about mission and the Spirit but the discerned participation of the early Church in this shift into a new sort of cultural engagement. This is the case even although the issue was not yet fully resolved in practice for the early church (Acts 15) or Peter (Gal 2).[62]

The emphasis on the Church in these verses is also apparent in the stress on baptism as the attendant practice accompanying belief and the receipt of the Holy Spirit.[63] In this respect, the CBAC stress on baptism as an indicator of missional success would appear appropriate. This said, the emphasis here is ecclesiological as well as individual. Moreover, in a post-Christendom

59. Pervo, *Acts*, 274–75.
60. Spencer, *Journeying*, 127.
61. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 360–61.
62. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 365.
63. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 360.

context, more reflection may be required on the cultural, social, and political significance of baptism. For all the stress on the excellent character of Cornelius, Peter's sermon on the Lordship of Jesus Christ would have been "a direct challenge to a Roman soldier's exclusive loyalty to Caesar."[64] Moreover, whether his conversion would have allowed Cornelius to continue as a centurion, it can be argued that baptism "would appear to prevent one from participation in the religious life of the Roman army."[65] This raises the ethical question of what it means post-Christendom to be a baptized believer and part of the community of the baptized who confess that ultimately they have no Lord other than the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 10:1—11:18 does not mark the end of discerning ethics for the Church, merely the beginning in a changing context.

Summation

Acts 10:1—11:18 records the dramatic and necessary adaptation of the early Christian Church to a new socio-cultural reality. This adaptation occurs around a mundane practice invested with profound social and theological meaning. The successful negotiation of this change in a missional direction required individual and corporate discernment concerning the reality of the cultural situation and the activity of the Holy Spirit, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Scripture and Scriptural precedents were not absent but were ambiguous and required interpretation not least with reference to the story of Jesus Christ. Yet the witness of the Christian Scriptures indicates that in taking the risk of the loss of identity, the way forward was in fulfilment of the plan of God for the geographical and cultural spread of the gospel and Christian Church.

Baptist Polity

I have sketched above something of the nature of the changed cultural context for the life and witness of the Christian Church at least in the Global North. I have suggested that Acts 10:1—

64. Holladay, *Acts*, 238.
65. Pervo, *Acts*, 268 n. 28.

11:18 provides a model for Christian cultural engagement in changed circumstances. I will now apply this specifically to Baptist polity.

According to Baptist polity, at the centre of our ecclesiological understanding is congregational gathering to discern the leading of Jesus Christ. In the UK this is expressed as follows according to the Baptist Union of Great Britain's Declaration of Principle:

> That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.[66]

The Canadian Baptists of Western Canada express the same principle as follows:

> We follow a congregational form of government in which believers come together as a priesthood of believers under the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine God's will for us.[67]

Baptists, therefore, claim that a central feature of their ecclesiology is congregational gathering in the Spirit, with attention to Scripture, with the purpose of discerning the contextual leading of Jesus Christ.

There are several ways in which such congregational "coming together" can be facilitated. This said, at a "formal" level such gathering takes place in what is called "the Church Meeting" or the "Church Business Meeting." Chris Ellis, British Baptist theologian, writes: "Baptist and Free Church disciples gather as *ekklesia* for worship, and they gather as *ekklesia* for mutual discernment and governance in church meeting. Here is communal discipleship in prayer and decision-making."[68]

Concerning the above, I have argued elsewhere that for Baptists to gather in this way is theologically to place ourselves

66. Baptists Together, "Declaration of Principle."
67. Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, "What Makes Us Baptist."
68. Ellis, *Gathering*, 237.

under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.[69] Pat Took, one-time President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, writes, "Our Baptist tradition is not in the First place about government of any kind except the Lordship of Christ. Any Christian community which makes a form of government its central tenet is in danger of losing its soul."[70] This Lordship, however, through the Spirit, is not merely figurative, for as Wright states reflecting upon the great text for congregational governance Matt 18:15–20, "By the Spirit of God . . . the risen Christ is in the midst of those communities of faith that look to him and keep his memory alive and believe that in so doing they share in the life of one who lives not just metaphorically or by force of human imagination, but truly and actually."[71] Consequently, while indeed this Lordship should be a source of constancy, it also carries the potential for the sort of disruption experienced in Acts 10:1—11:18. For the Lord of the Church, through the Spirit, can be the "deconstructive" inner "truth" of Christianity as he draws it forward into the kingdom come but still yet coming.[72] Or as Riddell argues, "critique" and "creativity" belong together when we follow the "beckoning God" into "uncharted territory, with many dangers and only the promise of Christ to lead us."[73]

Ryan Andrew Newson describes congregational gatherings for discernment as follows, "Through gathering and engaging in prayer, scriptural interpretation, honest argumentation, and patiently listening, the hope is that the community will apprehend—even if imperfectly and not always—contextually specific guidance from God."[74] The goal of such gathering, therefore, is specific guidance from God, the sort required for faithfully navigating cultural change. This guidance may reveal the presence of God at work in broader cultural developments. It may betray the falsity present in all cultural expressions. Be this as it may, the

69. This section of this paper summarizes, draws upon, develops, and applies aspects of my chapter "Your Will Be Always Done," 74–88.

70. Cited in Rollinson, "The Attentive Community," 3.

71. Wright, *Vital Truth*, 11.

72. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 82.

73. Riddell, *Threshold*, 29–41, 40.

74. Newson, *Radical Friendship*, 47.

guidance sought is that which will enable the Church to be gospel as well as to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God.[75] The goal of discernment, therefore, is not simply relevance but faithfulness. It is precisely such faithfulness, however, that may require new practices in a new context.

Through gathering as described above, experience, scripture, and the congregation, all play a part. Yet these are what McClendon calls "proximate authorities" pointing to and being held to account by the "love of God," "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," "the fellowship of Spirit," or the ultimate authority of the Triune God.[76] This is important. It means that while discernment may be "competent," it is yet provisional, open to critique and to further discernment in the light of new contexts.[77] To claim this does not go against the previously discussed authority that Baptists give to scripture. While scripture is seen as authoritative in matters of faith and practice that authority in Baptist understanding is derivative from the authority of Jesus Christ to whom it points and in the light of whom it has to be interpreted. My former colleague Dr. Jim Gordon expresses it as follows, "To live under the rule of the Word is to practice a radical hermeneutic through which Scripture bears final and decisive witness to Christ, and by which the living Christ, revealed in Scripture and encountered in the community of faith, becomes the hermeneutical crux and criterion."[78] This hermeneutical approach to the authority of scripture is consistent not only with the previously described and discussed British Baptist Union Declaration of Principle but also with McClendon's understanding of the baptist vision.[79] It means, therefore that "mutual study" of Scripture, along with prayer and conversation are central

75. This is my summary of McClendon, *Witness*, 36–49.
76. McClendon, "The Concept of Authority," 119–26.
77. Newson, *Radical Friendship*, 79.
78. Gordon, "Spirituality and Scripture," 106.
79. Another former colleague, Dr. Ian Birch develops Dr. Jim Gordon's work on this Baptist hermeneutic with explicit reference to McClendon's writing. Birch, "Baptists and Biblical Interpretation," 153–71.

activities in such discerning which is no "mere ballot-box democracy."[80]

If the above is indeed an appropriate theological re-appropriation of the Baptist Church meeting as a context for communal discernment, this has clear, practical outcomes. This is the case because the current reality is such meetings often focus on the insignificant, the routine, and at times the disciplinary, but seldom wrestle with issues of cultural and missional significance.[81] This is a failure of leadership because it is to the detriment of the congregation. The Baptist ethicist, the late Glen Stassen writes:

> Some churches seek to avoid offending any members, and so steer clear of controversial issues and confrontations. This is "Enlightenment lite": it reduces the gospel to private matters or general principles that do not clash with interests and ideologies. These churches fail to confront members in ways that provide the guidance we need in our lives, and they avoid addressing injustices and problems that threaten us. They offer something far removed from the Jesus in the gospels who challenges the religious and social complacency of his generation. Sociological studies show us that church members feel they need more specific instruction, even confrontation that calls us to grow in discipleship. Lacking this, "Enlightenment lite" churches lack the depth of commitment and the vigour they need to avoid the decline and decay that constitute a growing crisis.[82]

Not only will participation in such communal discernment create the opportunity for discerning contextual wisdom concerning cultural engagement, but as Newson also argues, the process itself can form participants into those better able to navigate changing times.[83]

80. McClendon, "The Concept of Authority," 125.

81. I illustrate this with respect to the discussion on Scottish Independence in Blythe, "Your Will Be Always Done," 74–88.

82. Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus*, 6.

83. Newson, *Radical Friendship*, 157.

Conclusion

The Christian Church must navigate the as-yet uncharted territory of the current post-Christendom cultural context. If the Church is to be both faithful and relevant, it will require appropriate resources. In this article, I have argued that such resources are in Baptist polity. These resources include the Baptist practice of seeking guidance from the Scripture, and the experience of the early Church, not least as represented in Acts 10:1—11:18. These very verses, however, demonstrate that to seek such guidance in a changing cultural context requires an openness to interpret Scripture in the light of the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ and the potentially disturbing power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Congregational gatherings, which are at the centre of Baptist ecclesiological polity, provide a local context in which such can take place. In this context, through Bible study, prayer, conversation, discussion, and debate, congregations can discern how they will respond to the critical challenges they face: Confidently yet provisionally as they remain open to new insight even as they move forward saying "this is that" we read about in the Scripture. Such a process has the potential not merely to inform but to form and transform congregations as they engage with culture.

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