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Towards Free Church Ecumenical Theology: On the Pre-Given Vocation to Listen

Henk Bakker

1. Introduction

It is a deep concern of Free Churches, in particular congregational churches, to keep matters in their own hands when communal decision-making is at stake. Free Churches tend to be, and remain, independent. However, mutual interests usually make them voluntary participants in local or regional networks, thereby equally displaying a feel of *episkopè*. After all, churches need other churches, their support and counsel to test and assure their accountability towards Christ. In this article I seek to explore the pre-given vocation of the church catholic to be a conciliar church from a Baptist point of view. Obviously, the two seem contradictory descriptors, for how can Baptists be conciliarity-oriented and remain Baptists at the same time? In my opinion, from a historical perspective and from a convictional perspective, they can and should.

At face value, Free Churches and apostolic succession seem to have nothing in common whatsoever. Free Churches maintain that their history does not have to be traced back to the early successors of Simon Peter in order to be called apostolic. As a matter of fact, this is also how the World Council of Churches (WCC) captures the meaning of the term “catholic”. According to the Faith and Order text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2012) every local church, simply by being itself, reflects “the fullness of what it is to be the Church”. For that matter, each church is “wholly Church, but not the whole Church”, and can only be understood in dynamic relation with other churches. As such, “the communion of local churches is not an optional extra”.¹ Moreover, the church envisaged by the WCC is characterized as a conciliar church, so as to nurture and foster tangible interconnectedness, and not the mere suggestion of it.²

¹ The World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2012), par. 31. https://www.oecumene.nl/files/Documenten/The_Church_-_Towards_a_common_Vision.pdf?ml=0&iframe=0 (accessed 22.03.2021).

² *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (as note 1), par. 8, 22, 30, 39. See on the history and theology of conciliarism in particular Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism. A History of Decision-Making in the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Adjacent to the church's conciliarity stands the profound idea of its catholicity, a predicate which features as an indicator of its unity as well as of its diversity. Both proceed from a specific subset of qualities of the church, viz. the well-known *notae ecclesiae*. There is a diversity that is legitimate, and there is a diversity that is illegitimate. The distinction, accurately brought to the fore by the WCC, is a very important one. Being the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (*una, sancta, catholica et apostolica*³) apparently gives rise to a shared awareness of a "legitimate diversity".⁴ Why? Early in the second century, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch already underscores this rather loose side-effect of the conception of catholicity when he addresses the incipient discord in the Smyrnaean Church with the following words: "Flee from divisions (...). You must all follow the bishop (...). Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church."⁵ So, being the church catholic, which is the community where the faithful assemble together with the bishop and not with the schismatics, basically means the "whole church resistant by its nature to division".⁶ Thus, to be catholic implies to have and to hold a steely determination of presenting the body of Christ unharmed, in every place, wherever and whenever. The true church catholic cannot be indifferent to disruption.

This serves to show that Free Churches, because of their outspoken conciliar demeanour, bring with them this catholic sense of "legitimate diversity" and "natural resistance to division". As a matter of fact, this is their way of doing (apostolic) succession, and this is their way of participating in the passing on of authentic Christian tradition. Baptist churches,

³ Heinrich Denzinger/Adolfus Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (Rome: Herder, 36th edn, 1976), par. 150 (Symbolum Constantinopolitanum).

⁴ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (as note 1), par. 12. This is not new; Barth had already used the wording "legitime (...) Vielheit" See Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV,1 (Studienausgabe Band 23; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), 753 (cf. 783–795).

⁵ *IgnSm* 8,1-2. Here the wording "catholic church" appears for the first time in (extant) Christian literature. The translation is taken from Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers. Greek Texts and English. Translations of Their Writings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2nd edn, 1992), 189, 191.

⁶ William Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch. A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 244.

and for that matter Anabaptist and baptist(ic) churches⁷, may be considered conciliar types of churches, as they have their origins deeply rooted in the history of the radical reformation, and on that account also in nascent humanistic traditions.⁸ For example, the attention given to individual conscience and the felt necessity of the individual to bring their private standpoint into public debate for the sake of truth, genuinely typifies the Protestant and humanist turn of the sixteenth century. Frequently, the final (or first) appeal of radicals was to plead their case in a public dispute.

For radical reformers and baptist(ic) thinkers this is what the church is all about. Communal decision expresses the core interest of the Christian congregation. Indeed, this is what Jesus meant when he introduced the church in the Gospel of Matthew. Here, for the first time the “church” (*ekklesia*) is explicitly referred to by Jesus, which he depicts as a discerning community, holding the mandate to “bind” and to “loose”. First, Jesus surrenders (metaphorically speaking) the “keys” of the kingdom of heaven to Peter the apostle, appointing him as the “key” person who opens and closes the gate. Subsequently, two chapters later, Jesus entrusts the same authority to the assembled church. On both occasions the church is given explicit direction:

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (...). I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”⁹

“If he refuses to listen to them tell it to the church (...). Truly, I say to you whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”¹⁰

The binding and loosing faculty of the church entails its commission to accept (“loose”) or disapprove of (“bind”) the Christian’s conduct regarding halachic matters the church has to deal with every day. So, if a

⁷ Baptist churches practice believer’s baptism by immersion and for that reason call themselves “Baptist”, whereas baptist(ic) churches also practice faith-baptism by immersion without carrying the name Baptist. They may be Pentecostal, charismatic or simply free churches, loosely connected to a denomination or representing no denomination at all.

⁸ Cf. Henk Bakker, “We are all equal” (*Omnes sumus aequales*). A Critical Assessment of Early Protestant Ministerial Thinking’, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 44 (2017) 353–376.

⁹ Matt. 16:18–19.

¹⁰ Matt. 18:17–18.

brother or a sister by lifestyle drifts away from the community of the faithful, the community may ‘gain’ the backslider as a penitent, only if they are visited by “two or three witnesses”. Yet, if they do not adhere, the witnesses form the very quorum necessary to charge them before the gathered church. It takes the gathered church to discipline a brother or sister, and in the end, if necessary, to ostracize them. Furthermore, the two or three are invited to depend on Jesus himself. For, where “two or three” unanimously pray for discernment, seeking to admonish a backsliding brother and to lead him back to the church, there Jesus endorses the outcome.¹¹ Hence, the discerning community – by quality of its communal procedure – is attributed sacramental power to pray, to discern, to restore, to discipline, and to forgive, as the Gospel of John affirms: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”¹²

By their common practice of communal discernment, Free Churches, in the first place, foster the Believers Church tradition as third church type, the typology of which I coin as “discerning churches”. However, along with their discerning faculty, these churches also pass on their pre-given catholic intent, because catholicity and discernment tend to go together, as I will demonstrate in the following six sections. In keen early Christian fathers such as Cyprian and Augustine, and in profound reformers like Luther and Zwingli, we see much of these bifocal catholic dynamics invested. Finally, I focus on the lasting influence of Balthasar Hubmaier on the formative beginnings of the radical reform, in which communal discernment seems to be the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.

To be sure, in Catholic theology, too, the significance of the dynamics of multiple perspectives involved in ecclesial interpretation is properly recognized. Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, warns against the mere imposition of a plethora of doctrines by disjointed transmission. Churches need to “receive with integrity” in order to process their doctrinal tradition within the hermeneutical frame of *sensus fidei* [or *fidelium*]. As such, the dialogue envisaged is characterized as a matter of the church’s active interest in its own synodality. Hereby, the church enables itself to authenticate its own legacy.¹³

¹¹ Matt. 18:19–20.

¹² John 20:23.

¹³ Gregory A. Ryan, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine in a Learning Church* (Studies in Systematic Theology 23; Leiden: Brill, 2020), 2, 40–44, 45–47, 130, 162–171, 184,

2. On Cyprian's Catholicity

A discerning community does not merely represent Christ, since representation presumes absence of the one represented. Given the fact that he is present, discerning churches live and pass on the presence of Christ. However, the sacramentality of conciliar practice does not evolve from its leaders (bishops or otherwise) or from its bishopric structure, but, as Cyprian clearly propounded around the middle of the third century, from the church itself. In his renowned tractate *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, Cyprian seems to introduce the idea that Peter occupying the see of Rome should be venerated as the reflection of the one and only Church of Christ: *sed primatus Petro datur et una ecclesia et cathedra una monstratur*.¹⁴ However, this so-called Primacy Text, which may be an interpolated text to prove that ecclesiastical integrity is invested in the Roman see after all,¹⁵ and which has caused much debate and suspicion between many different parties ever since, cannot overshadow the basic purport of Cyprian's account, namely that of unity as a sacrament.

Lately, much has been written on Cyprian's central thinking on the church.¹⁶ For many the bishop professed strong episcopalian views of the church, and clearly he did. In Cyprian's own words: "You ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop",¹⁷ which can be rephrased as "no bishop: no church", and vice versa. Nonetheless, Cyprian was more of a pastoral ecclesial leader than a speculative theological thinker. According to Ulrich Wickert, the hermeneutical key to Cyprianic thinking is not hierarchy but the church itself, which was sacramental to

193, 206, 211, 228, 235–239.

¹⁴ Cyprian, 'De unitate' 4, in: Jan Nicolaas Bakhuizen van den Brink (ed.), *S. Caecilii Cypriani episcopi Carthaginensis martyris scripta quaedam* (Scriptores christiani primaevi 1; Den Haag: Bert Bakker, 1961), 26. Cf. Cyprian, ep. 59.14 and 71.3. Cf. Henk Bakker et al., 'Introduction: Cyprian's Stature and Influence', in: Henk Bakker et al. (eds), *Cyprian of Carthage. Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought* (Late Antique History and Religion 3; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 1–27: 9.

¹⁵ Cf. Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Lateinische Kirchenväter* (Urban-Bücher 50; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2nd edn, 1965), 51: "Eine tendenziöse Korrektur".

¹⁶ See Bakker et al., 'Introduction (as note 14), 1–27: 15, note 70.

¹⁷ Cyprian, ep. 66.8: *scire debes episcopum in ecclesia esse et ecclesiam in episcopo*. The words come close to Ignatius's wording in *IgnSm* 8,2 already referred to, and here recapitulated in Latin: *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*.

him.¹⁸ Just as for Paul the apostle, the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3) expresses the mystery of the church’s supreme bond to Christ, so for Cyprian the “one church” is a true sacrament of grace, a “sacrament of unity” (*sacramentum unitatis*),¹⁹ not because it consists of a petrocentric body of clergy, but because of its metrocentric concern as regards interconnectedness and wholeness.²⁰ The church is the “allverbindende” Mother of all saints,²¹ and therefore the sacrament of God. This is a leading thought throughout Cyprian’s work, and here we reach *terra firma* for Free Church ecclesiology.

Cyprian was gifted with an acute sense of catholicity as he applied the extent of *kath’ holè* to every single believer. All of the faithful, wherever and however they be, are constitutive of the “full” church catholic. Communal grace may signify effective grace only if Christ’s presence in the gathered church unifies Christians into covenanting communities, consisting of ordinary people. Their consent was therefore asked at conciliar and ceremonial meetings, and it is precisely here that we observe commonalities between third-century African Christianity and early Baptist congregationalism.²² In Free Church thinking, episcopacy is not a prerogative of hierarchy. Significantly, this means that clergy are of time, not of eternity.²³

¹⁸ Ulrich Wickert, ‘Zum Kirchenbegriff Cyprians’, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 92 (1967) 257-260: 258. Cf. Günter Klein, ‘Die hermeneutische Struktur des Kirchengedankens bei Cyprian’, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 68 (1957) 48–68.

¹⁹ Cyprian, *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate* 4. Cf. *ep.* 51.1, with a reference to Eph. 5:31–32.

²⁰ Wickert, ‘Zum Kirchenbegriff Cyprians’ (as note 18), 260.

²¹ Cf. Cyprian, *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate* 6: “He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother”. Cf. Karl Barth, ‘Die Heilsnotwendigkeit der Kirche ist uns tatsächlich vorgeschrieben’, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Studienausgabe Band 4; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), 1.2: 232–233. Cf. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Studienausgabe Band 1; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1986), 1.1: 99.

²² Cf. Malcolm B. Yarnell III, ‘The Covenant Theology of the Early Anabaptists’, in: Paul S. Fiddes (ed.), *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation. The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists, and Early General Baptists* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2018), 15–62, and Paul S. Fiddes, ‘Covenant and the Inheritance of Separatism’, in: Fiddes, *The Fourth Strand*, 63–92.

²³ Cf. Olof H. de Vries, *Gelovig gedoopt. 400 jaar baptisme – 150 jaar in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), 74.

3. On Cyprian's Conciliarity

Again, in third-century Carthage, the ecclesial council constituted the place where the average church member could let their voices be heard. Whereas Cyprian inaugurated the beginnings of the (later) Catholic Church, the communal structure of decision-making the Carthaginian church practiced proved very open for lay input.²⁴ When major decisions were at hand, such as the appointment of a church leader, ordinary people were present. Cyprian wrote:

Hence, we should show sedulous care in preserving a practice which is based on divine teaching and apostolic observance, a practice which is indeed faithfully followed among us and in practically every province. And it is this: when an episcopal appointment is to be duly solemnised, all the neighbouring bishops in the same province convene for the purpose along with the people for whom the leader is to be appointed; the bishop is then selected in the presence of those people [*plebe praesente*], for they are the ones who are acquainted most intimately with the way each man has lived his life and they have had the opportunity thoroughly to observe his conduct and behaviour.²⁵

Moreover, we can see that divine authority is also the source for the practice whereby bishops are chosen in the presence of the laity [*plebe praesente*] and before the eyes of all, and they are judged as being suitable and worthy after public scrutiny and testimony (...). Here God directs that His priest is to be invested before all of the assembled people; that is to say, he is instructing and demonstrating to us that priestly appointments are not made without the cognisance and attendance of the people [*populi adsistentis*], so that in the presence of the laity [*plebe praesente*] the iniquities of the wicked can be revealed and the merits of the good proclaimed, and thus an appointment may become right and lawful if it has been examined, judged, and voted upon by all (...). And we notice that the apostles observed this rule not in the appointment of priests and bishops only, but even in the case of deacons as well.²⁶

²⁴ See for the following Henk Bakker, 'Towards a Catholic Understanding of Baptist Congregationalism: Conciliar Power and Authority', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011) 159–183.

²⁵ Cyprian, *ep.* 67.5.1. See Alexander W. H. Evers, 'Post populi suffragium. Cyprian of Carthage and the Vote of the People in Episcopal Elections', in: Bakker et al., *Cyprian of Carthage* (as note 14), 165–180. See for the Latin text David Johann Heinrich Goldhorn, *Th.C. Cypriani opera genuina, pars I: epistolae* (Bibliotheca patrum ecclesiasticorum latinorum selecta 2/1; Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1838), 182.

²⁶ Cyprian, *ep.* 67.4.1–3, see Goldhorn, *Th.C. Cypriani opera genuina, pars I* (as note 25), 181–182. Cf. Cyprian, *ep.* 67,4: "Which very thing, too, we observe to come from divine authority, that the priest should be chosen in the presence of the people

Apparently, Cyprian underscored the presence of ordinary church people at ecclesial ordinations. Clergy were elected *plebe praesente*, in the midst of laity. Likewise, the laity had the capacity to depose the bishop, if he had been found guilty of great sin.²⁷

4. On Augustine's Conciliarity

It was an established early Christian practice to ask (at particular moments) for the consent of the people present at decisive communal occasions. For example, when at a consecration ceremony it was asked three times "Is this the man whom ye desire?", every one present was allowed to respond by acclamation, approbation or applause.²⁸ The practice can be textually verified in different geographical regions as early as the mid-second century.²⁹ What was included in the role of the laity cannot be traced precisely, but the presence of the *plebs christiana* in ecclesiastical affairs was definitely an important one. Already in ancient Rome acclamations like cheering or applauding simply expressed "yay" or "nay", and indeed were taken as legal procedures for expressing public opinion – this rather messy "voice" could tentatively be deciphered as the suffrage of the people (*suffragium*) – in social-political matters, always intertwined with religious issues. Understandably, ecclesial events, too, provided ample opportunity for submitting petitions and requests.

In this regard, Augustine's letter addressed to a Christian lady named Albina (411 AD) is quite instructive. The majority of the church of Hippo almost forced her son-in-law (Pinianus) into ecclesial office against his will. On several occasions the assembly was clamorous, and even intimidating, while Augustine sought to intervene. Moreover, he feared that the building would collapse from the turmoil as the proceedings became in-

under the eyes of all [*plebe praesente sub omnium oculis*], and should be approved worthy and suitable by public judgment and testimony."

²⁷ Cf. Cyprian, *ep.* 67.3.1–2; 67.3.2.

²⁸ See Paul F. Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition. A Commentary* (Herme-
neia; Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002), 25: "After he [the bishop] has been nominat-
ed and approved, let the people come together on the Lord's Day (...). Let them the
third time (...) ask again whether he be truly worthy of this ministry (...). And when
they have agreed for the third time that he is worthy, let them all be asked to give their
assent [or: vote], and giving it eagerly, let them be heard."

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

creasingly tumultuous.³⁰ Simple, poor and beggarly folk would loudly interrupt and suggest amendments. They were evidently present, raising their voices, shouting “yay” and “nay”.³¹

5. Authenticity, Conciliarity and Sacramentality

The church’s catholicity, in particular in secular times, should be explained in terms of its authenticity.³² Authentic faith, lived in authentic practices, reaches back to normative sources in early Christian times, as James McClendon observes: catholic means “authentic Christian existence *fully extended* in space and time”.³³ So, which authentic practices should the church carry on in space and time in order to call itself the church catholic? Among others, it should pass on its conciliar treasures, its privilege and obligation to discern the mind of Christ. “When some weighty matter is to be decided, this is done by summoning a council and ascertaining the consensus of the Church”, John Macquarrie maintains,³⁴ and this is what

³⁰ Augustine, *Epistola ad Albinam* 1–4: “Lest some of the reckless characters (...) might break out into bold acts of violence”, and: “the crowd having gathered in front of the steps, and persisting in the same determination with terrible and incessant clamour and shouting, made them irresolute and perplexed. At that time unworthy reproaches were loudly uttered against my brother Alypius”, and “I myself had thoughts of retiring, being alarmed chiefly for the safety of the building”, and: “The people (...) made the request that to this promise and oath a clause may be added”, and: “when the words which he had dictated were read by the deacon, and had been received with approbation, as soon as the clause (...) fell upon their ears, there arose at once a shout of remonstrance, and the promise was rejected; and the tumult began to break out again.”

³¹ Augustine, *Epistola ad Albinam* 5 and 7: “The response of the people was, ‘Thanks be unto God!’, and they begged that all which was written should be subscribed”, and: “It was this admiration which kindled the minds of the people, and roused them to such violence of persevering clamour (...), although there may have mixed in the crowd some who are indigent or beggars, who helped to increase the clamour.”

³² John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, revised edition, 1977), 407.

³³ James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3: Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 335.

³⁴ Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (as note 32), 407. Cf. Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity. Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 71–110, 151–177.

the Jerusalem leaders in New-Testament times wished to observe, and what Cyprian and Augustine were committed to. If it was at all possible, they listened to all the voices, and there they found the very sacrament of spiritual discernment wrapped as a gift of the Spirit for the benefit of the community (*diakriseis pneumatōn*).³⁵ Here the presence of Christ, as promised in Matthew 16 and 18, materializes in the gathered church, namely in its pursuit of wisdom.

A search for the roots of Free Churches leads mainly to the Reformation era, and quite acutely demonstrates the pivotal role the gift of discernment plays in its history and primary theology. For example, Anabaptists as well as Baptists sought to re-define for themselves the meaning of “church”, the “church catholic”, and found that its authenticity was tightly interwoven with its Gospel-centeredness. A Gospel church, according to many founding fathers of the baptistic type of churches, by definition enjoyed the presence of Christ and was granted the gift of immediacy and sacramentality. Both go inextricably together in early baptistic thinking, because Christ veritably imparts himself to a community of visible saints. In manifold Anabaptist churches the gathered community expected to receive ‘further light’ to find its way into the gloomy shades of the world.

The expectation of immediacy goes together well with the idea of sacramentality. If Christ is speaking living words in the church, His words signify nothing less than effective grace. The basic rationale of the binary concept of immediacy and sacramentality in conciliar thinking was developed to some extent by the Reformers Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli. Without a doubt, Luther was in accord with the so-called conciliar movement that prevailed in pre-reformation times. At the Council of Constance (1414–1418), on 6 April 1415, the famous *Haec sancta synodus* declaration (‘This holy synod’) was accepted, pronouncing that a general council “has power immediately from Christ”, and that “everyone of whatever state or dignity, even papal, is bound to obey it in those matters which pertain to the faith”.³⁶

³⁵ 1 Cor. 12:10.

³⁶ Cf. Bakker, “‘We are all equal’” (as note 8), 359. See for the text Hermann von der Hardt (ed.), *Magnum oecumenicum Constantiense concilium*, tome IV: *Corpus actorum et decretorum magni Constantiensis concilii de Ecclesiae reformatione, unione ac fide* (Frankfurt/Leipzig: 1696–1700).

6. On Luther's and Zwingli's Conciliarity

Luther regularly persisted in having free councils,³⁷ although no council was ever granted to him. In line with the Council of Constance he was convinced that a general council regarding matters of the Christian faith would surpass the authority of the pope.³⁸ A free council is to be considered simply as a gathered church discussing ecclesial issues, so that “everyone and all Christians together” have the mandate of judging doctrine.³⁹ This ecclesial competence (and authorisation) is not merely invested in clergy who dictate councils. They may teach, but the “sheep should judge if they actually teach the voice of Christ or the voice of a stranger”, Luther said.⁴⁰ Every Christian is taught from God and every Christian is called to be priest.⁴¹ Therefore, the church catholic acts as a royal priesthood, for, he propounded, all its “priests are equal”.⁴² Together, as a community, Christians are committed to preach and teach the Word of God,⁴³ for “whosoever had Christ, had all that Christ was, and everything that Christ did”.⁴⁴ Thus, in matters of spiritual direction, decisions are taken

³⁷ Cf. Martin Luther, ‘Disputatio de potestate concilii’ (1536), in: Günther Wartenberg/Michael Beyer (eds), *Martin Luther. Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009), 3 vols: vol. 3, 682–685, and Martin Luther, ‘Von den Konzilien und Kirchen’ (1539), in: Karin Bornkamm/Gerhard Ebeling (eds), *Martin Luther. Ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1982), 6 vols: vol. 5, 182–221. “Deshalb appelliere ich und berufe mich mit dieser Schrift auf ein zukünftiges freies, sicheres Konzil für mich und für alle, die mir anhängen und zukünftig anhängen werden” (Bornkamm/Ebeling, *Martin Luther* vol. 3, 74–75).

³⁸ “Auch ist es offenbar, daß ein christliches allgemeines Konzil, besonders in Sachen des christlichen Glaubens, über dem Papst steht”, in ‘D. Martin Luthers Appellation oder Berufung an ein christliches freies Konzil von dem Papst Leo und seinem unrechten Frevel, erneuert und repetiert’ (1520), in: Bornkamm/Ebeling, *Martin Luther* (as note 37), vol. 3, 71.

³⁹ Bornkamm/Ebeling, *Martin Luther* (as note 37), vol. 5, 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13; and Martin Luther, ‘De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae’ (1520), in: Wartenberg/Beyer, *Martin Luther* (as note 37), vol. 3, 350.17–18.

⁴² *Omnes sumus aequales*; cf. *omnes sumus aequales, sacerdotes et laici* (*ibid.*, 248.5–6) and *omnes nos aequaliter esse sacerdotes* (356.12), and *nos omnes esse aequaliter sacerdotes, quotquot baptisati sumus, sicut revera sumus* (350.12–13).

⁴³ *Consensu communitatis*, see *ibid.*, 349.13–37; 357.24–26.

⁴⁴ *Qui Christianus est, Christum habet, qui Christum habet, omnia, quae Christi sunt habet, omnia potens*, *ibid.*, 358.21–22.

by communal consent.⁴⁵ This, more or less, summarizes a major ecclesial change brought about by early Lutheran communities and, of course, by Luther's own idealism.

Running close to Luther's conciliar vision is that of Zwingli. Initially, his conciliar ideas seem to go beyond Luther's. Zwingli's "angehaucht sein" to a more urban humanist environment marks him out as a Reformer who principally looks for "Glaubensgespräch" and free discussion, no matter what. His way of doing theology holds at its heart a dialogical argument,⁴⁶ and this is how things developed during the early Magisterial Reform in Zurich. Zwingli made no formal appeal for a free council, because as a major architect of the Zurich reform he was perfectly able to state and foster his humanist mindset in critical faith conversations between key figures in church and society.⁴⁷ For example, he was privileged to have his students read Scripture in the original languages, and have them translate and discuss the text. The atmosphere of these so-called prophesyings (halfway 1525) was promising and inquisitive, attesting the perspective that church and state are called to maintain the common vehicle of civic dispute (*disputatio*).⁴⁸ Disputations were free councils with ample opportunity for communal discussion ("ein freies Konzil"⁴⁹). The idea was not new, but gained momentum in the districts of Zurich in Zwingli's day.⁵⁰

The civic *disputatio*, too, was a vital instrument for ordinary believers to participate in "Glaubensgespräch" in ecclesial matters. Zwingli teaches

⁴⁵ Ibid., 356.14–15.

⁴⁶ Lee Palmer Wandel, 'Zwingli and Reformed Practice', in: John van Engen (ed.), *Educating People of Faith. Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 270–293: 271.

⁴⁷ Erasmus's influence on Zwingli was significant; see in particular Joachim Rogge, *Zwingli und Erasmus. Die Friedensgedanken des jungen Zwingli* (Arbeiten zur Theologie 11; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1962).

⁴⁸ See Gottfried W. Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 161–163, and Martin Hauser, *Prophet und Bischof. Huldrych Zwinglis Amtsverständnis im Rahmen der Zürcher Reformation* (Ökumenische Beihefte 21; Freiburg i. Ue.: Universitätsverlag 1994), 132–147.

⁴⁹ Alfred Farner, *Die Lehre von Kirche und Staat bei Zwingli* (Reihe Libelli 318; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, reprint 1973), 92–93.

⁵⁰ Cf. Klaas Marten Witteveen, 'Het leven van Huldrych Zwingli', in: Willem Balke et al. (eds), *Zwingli in vierderlei perspectief* (Utrecht: De Banier, 1984), 7–39: 35–36.

how God's Word, by itself, may capture the soul of every Christian. All believers may have true impressions of the meaning of Scripture and participate in disputations regarding church affairs. The Word is free and cannot be regulated by institutions. People can read, hear, and decide for themselves,⁵¹ even though they have no real understanding of philosophy and theology. The Word, by its clarity, is perfectly able to direct them to sound spiritual discernment.

In a note Zwingli corroborates the revelatory power of the Word by personal experience. Around eight years earlier he had committed himself to the Scriptures, but critical learning frustrated him. Thereupon, prompted by Scripture itself, he put aside critical instruments so as to study the Word as it is. The Reformer was consumed with learning God's will from the plain Word itself, unconditionally, without critical human intervention. Even trained theologians have to deal with arrogance and reservations in order to prepare themselves for the *vox Christi* and true spiritual discernment ("Gottes Willen unmittelbar aus seinem eigenen, eindeutigen Wort lernen"⁵²).

There is ample evidence that the Reformer passed on this conciliar disposition to many like-minded individuals who were involved in the reformation movement, in particular to his students. However, after a couple of years some former students accused their teacher of betraying the congregation as a conciliar means ("die Preisgabe der Gemeinde"⁵³). After facing possible disruption of the Zurich renewal, Zwingli strongly inclined back towards (and insisted on) ecclesial-magisterial structures. As a result, his opponents had to leave the district or retract.

⁵¹ Huldrych Zwingli, 'Die Klarheit und Gewißheit des Wortes Gottes' (1522), in: Thomas Brunnschweiler/Samuel Luntz (eds), *Huldrych Zwingli Schriften* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1995), 4 vols: vol. 1, 105–154: 124–154.

⁵² In Zwingli, 'Die Klarheit und Gewißheit des Wortes Gottes' (as note 51), 149: par 379.

⁵³ Bakker, 'We are all equal' (as note 8), 367. See John Howard Yoder, *Täuferium und Reformation. Dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung der frühen Gespräche zwischen Schweizerischen Täufern und Reformatoren* (Basler Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie 13; Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968), 117.

7. Hubmaier's Example

One of Zwingli's former friends, though not a student, was the radical Reformer Balthasar Hubmaier from Waldshut, near Zurich. In the early 1520s, Hubmaier was still on speaking terms with the Zurich Reformer. Together, often in private conversations, they reflected on issues with regard to the reform. Only a year before his turn to believer's baptism, Hubmaier publicly announced a council in Waldshut by publishing *Eighteen Dissertations Concerning the Entire Christian Life and of What It Consists* (1524).⁵⁴ In the cover letter he opens the invitation by pointing to "an old custom" that originated with the Early Church, namely "that when evil things befall concerning the faith, all men who wish to speak the word of God (...), should assemble to search the Scriptures (...). Such an assembly has been called the synod (...), bring your Bibles."⁵⁵

The so-called 'old custom' referred to clearly concerns the practice of conciliar consultation and discernment. The practice, somewhat inadequately reintroduced by Luther and Zwingli, had profound influence on radical parties in Germany, Switzerland, and the Low Countries, as well as on early Baptists, who are considered birds of the same feather in this regard. Conciliar decision-making appears like a golden feather in baptistic congregational plumage. Baptist churches consider themselves discerning churches or Bible-reading churches with a communal hermeneutic evolving from their storied identities. Free Churches read and capture their identity basically in identity narratives as constructed (perhaps unwittingly) from their own interaction with Scripture, from their everyday life stories, collective memories and expectations.

Hence, communal decision-making is not a modern invention that originates from a westernized concept of authentic Christian conciliarism and democratic idealism. Discerning churches aspire to be controlled by Christ, not by democracy. As a matter of fact, the very "body-life" of the church, its life of the Spirit, flows from its Head to the rest of the body. In its innermost "self" the body of the church is destined to live Christocrat-

⁵⁴ William Lumpkin (ed.), *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 5th edn, 1983), 19–23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

ically.⁵⁶ The rule of Christ shapes the community into a place of covenant, where the moral space of Christ leads individuals into a disposition of commitment. William Bradford recalled the solemn event of the covenant-making of the Separatists of Scrooby in 1606 or 1607 (two years later, the congregation travelled into religious exile in Amsterdam, adopted the practice of believers' baptism, and planted the first Baptist church). They joined themselves, according to Bradford, by a covenant of the Lord into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to "walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known" unto them, according to their "best endeavors", "whatsoever it should cost" them, and the "Lord assisting" them.⁵⁷ This is just one example out of many, that illustrates how the rule of Christ builds dedicated Christians into a covenanting community, a Christocratic body of believers who promise to listen to one another.

8. Listening to All the Voices: Messianic Catholicity

Only by its conciliarity, only by its prompt listening to the ruling voice of Christ in the gift of discernment, is the church entitled to cross borders. It is by listening to all voices, "at all levels of ecclesial life: local, regional and universal" (WCC),⁵⁸ that the church can justify her mission to the world and intervene in people's lives on behalf of Christ. For that reason, Christian mission and synodic tradition go well together, as they always have done.⁵⁹ This vocation, naturally, also confronts Christian communities with the awareness of and uneasiness with its deep diversity. The

⁵⁶ Cf. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV,2 (as note 4), 770. Cf. Henk Bakker, 'Het congregationale [independentistische] perspectief', in: Leon van den Broeke/George Harinck (eds), *Nooit meer eene nieuwe hiërarchie! De kerkrechterlijke nalatenschap van F.L. Rutgers* (Ad Chartas-Reeks 34; Hilversum: De Vuurbaak, 2018), 125–133: 129.

⁵⁷ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Historical Society, 1912; orig. 1620–1647), 20–22.

⁵⁸ Cf. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (as note 1), par. 53. Cf. Ryan, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (as note 13), 43: "the hermeneutical role of the *sensus fidei* is at issue here, as well as the questions about how a plurality of voices can be heard".

⁵⁹ Adolf von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Wiesbaden: VMA-Verlag, reprint 1982), 456–459: 456: "Sehr bald (von Anfang an?) erschien die Synode, diese Repräsentanz des ganzen christlichen Namens (...) als ein besonders zuverlässiges Instrument des heiligen Geistes."

church is profoundly multi-voiced, which is a source of great joy as well as paralyzing agony.⁶⁰

The apostle Paul is familiar with both, as he says in one and the same letter: “Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel (...) now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings (...), so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen”, alongside, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.”⁶¹ In one breath the apostle sings the praise of the church of all peoples, and bemoans the fractures that were becoming apparent, namely the estrangement diagnosed between Christian Jews and Jews rejecting the Gospel. The church catholic first of all transcends ethnic boundaries (“there is neither Jew nor Gentile”), as well as social boundaries and gender boundaries,⁶² and consequently has to deal with countless conciliar complexities throughout the world,⁶³ but some priority seems to be given to the apostle’s heart-felt concern with this “parting of the ways”.⁶⁴

Within the Matthean tradition the same consideration and attentiveness can be detected. As reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples of Jesus were initially not allowed to cross the borders of Israel. Yet, the Gospel closes with Jesus commanding the disciples to transgress the boundaries of Israel and evangelize the nations.⁶⁵ The Matthean church of Jews and gentiles should gather for conciliar decision-making in order to stipulate regulations for a community of multiple ethnicity.⁶⁶ Moreover, in

⁶⁰ See Stuart Murray/Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Church* (Milton-Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

⁶¹ Rom. 16:25–27; 9:2.

⁶² Gal. 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

⁶³ Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 210–238.

⁶⁴ Cf. Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews. The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Adam H. Becker/Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways That Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Oskar Skarsaune/Reidar Hvalvik (eds), *Jewish Believers in Jesus. The Early Centuries* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007); and Julie Galambush, *The Reluctant Parting. How the New Testament’s Jewish Writers Created a Christian Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

⁶⁵ Compare Matt. 10:5–6 and 28:28.

⁶⁶ Matt. 18:16–17, 19–20.

the so-called *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Didachè),⁶⁷ written circa 100 AD,⁶⁸ Christians are being taught to pray for the restoration of the scattered church. The spiritual entreaty appears twice in the liturgy: “So may your church be gathered into your kingdom from the ends of the earth”, and “your church (...), gather it from the four winds, into the kingdom which you have prepared for it.”⁶⁹

Without a doubt, the text is reminiscent of Jewish traditions and, as such, preoccupied with the unity of the people of God. For that reason, the new maxim of the church catholic is “Wherever the Lord’s nature is preached, there the Lord is”.⁷⁰ When itinerant preachers visit, they are free to teach the church, if they preach the Lord.⁷¹ The assumption that the *ecclesia ex circumcisione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus* had turned their backs on one another in Matthean churches, cannot be warranted.⁷² The church and the synagogue may have co-existed as rivals. As a matter of fact, a general parting of the ways between churches and synagogues

⁶⁷ Cf. Huub van de Sandt, ‘Een gemeenschap op zoek naar haar identiteit. De gemeente van de Didachè’, in: Joël Delobel et al. (eds), *Vroegchristelijke gemeenten tussen werkelijkheid en ideaal* (Opstellen van leden van de Studiosorum Novi Testamenti Conventus; Kampen: Kok, 2001), 178–192; Clayton N. Jefford, ‘The Milieu of Matthew the Didache, and Ignatius of Antioch: Agreements and Differences’, in: Huub van de Sandt (ed.), *Matthew and the Didache. Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?* (Minneapolis-Assen: Fortress/Royal Van Gorcum, 2005), 35–47, and Aaron Milavec, ‘When, Why, and for Whom Was the Didache Created? Insights into the Social and Historical Setting of the Didache Communities’, in: Van de Sandt, *Matthew and the Didache*, 63–84.

⁶⁸ See Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache. A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 52–54.

⁶⁹ *Didachè* 9,4; 10,5. Cf. Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (as note 68), 144, 151, 155, and Gerard Rouwhorst, ‘Didache 9–10: A Litmus Test for the Research on Early Christian Liturgy Eucharist’, in Van de Sandt, *Matthew and the Didache* (as note 67), 143–156.

⁷⁰ *Didachè* 4,1, in Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (as note 5), 254–255. Niederwimmer translates: “for at the source of proclamation of the lordship [of the Lord], the Lord is there”, Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (as note 68), 103.

⁷¹ *Didachè* 11,1.4.7; 12,1; 13,1–2. Cf. Hermas, *Mandate* 11 (43,1–21), and Jannes Reiling, *Herms and Christian Prophecy. A Study of the Eleventh Mandate* (Novum Testamentum Supplements 37; Leiden: Brill, 1973).

⁷² Cf. Bas ter Haar Romeny, ‘Hypotheses on the Development of Judaism and Christianity in Syria in the Period after 70 C.E.’ in: Van de Sandt, *Matthew and the Didache* (as note 67), 13–33; Jonathan A. Draper, ‘Do the Didache and Matthew Reflect an “Irrevocable Parting of the Ways”?’ in: Van de Sandt, *Matthew and the Didache* (as note 67), 217–241.

was not the case in Mediterranean regions. In most places Jews and Christians lived peacefully together, expecting that God, in the end of days, would heal the nations.

Catholicity and authenticity should not settle for less than robust Messianic reunion, which is catholicity reaching back to the Jewish remnant rallied by Jesus, and through this remnant to the whole of the people of Israel. It is a shame that so often in ecumenical circles the Jewish part of the church is neglected or negated.⁷³ There is a “diversity that is illegitimate”. Until now the church catholic has generally excluded Jews from its conciliar agenda,⁷⁴ as Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt highlights: “Christus nicht bekennende Juden finden im Ökumene-Denken der Kirchen keinen Platz.”⁷⁵

If the worldwide church is to be restored to its original and authentic gestalt, the church catholic should start to take Mark S. Kinzer’s bilateral ecclesiology as a stepping stone to go by, and to invite Jews, Christian or not, to the negotiation table.⁷⁶ The church catholic needs to reckon with the presence of Christ with the Jewish people who do not accept Jesus as Messiah, albeit “in a hidden and obscure fashion”.⁷⁷ In any case, the church catholic cannot dismiss the Jewish people without bringing its own catholicity into jeopardy.⁷⁸

⁷³ Cf. Ernst Johannes Beker/Johannes Martinus Hasselaar, *Wegen en kruispunten in de dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1990), 5 vols: vol. 5, 99–102.

⁷⁴ One of the few exceptions is the initiative in the year 2000 of the Roman Catholic – Messianic Jewish Dialogue Group. Cf. Mark S. Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery. Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 35–39.

⁷⁵ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Von Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie. Prolegomena zur Dogmatik* (München: Kaiser, 1988), 409–458: 410)

⁷⁶ Mark S. Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism. Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 151–179. Cf. Mark S. Kinzer, *Israel’s Messiah and the People of God. A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 175–195: 189, and Tommy Givens, *We the People. Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

⁷⁷ Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* (as note 76), 134–135, 217, 233.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 263–302. See also Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery* (as note 74), 172–189: 183–184. Cf. Mark S. Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen. The Resurrected Messiah, the Jewish People, and the Land of Promise* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018).

In summary, discerning churches (free or baptistic churches), often quite unwittingly, “do” ecumenical theology by conciliar discernment. Their authenticity as a church catholic is grounded in the lasting practice of sacramental decision-making (in Christ’s presence), as is also exemplarily demonstrated with the Early-Church Fathers Cyprian and Augustine, with the Reformers Luther and Zwingli, and with the Anabaptist Hubmaier. The pre-given obligation to listen to all the voices, as advocated by most Free Churches, should evolve into a robust type of Messianic Catholicity, in which the completeness of the church, also with Jewish Christians and/or non-Christians, is passionately hoped for.

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Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird die eigenwillige Art und Weise erkundet, in der Freikirchen des baptistischen Typs Ökumene betreiben. In Übereinstimmung mit kirchlichen Denkern wie Cyprian und Augustinus, massgeblichen Reformatoren wie Luther und Zwingli und sogar mit dem täuferischen «Vater» Hubmaier, bringen Freikirchen ihre katholische (und insofern authentische) Absicht zum Ausdruck, indem sie den Geist Christi gemeinsam unterscheiden. Sie versammeln sich, diskutieren und beten, in der Erwartung, dass Christus anwesend sei und die (sakramentale) Gabe der Unterscheidung gewähre. Nur wenn die Kirche auf alle Stimmen hört, demonstriert und bekräftigt sie ihre katholische Haltung. Deshalb darf die Kirche nicht mehr länger die Stimme des gebrochenen Leibes Christi ignorieren oder an konziliaren Tischen vergessen, die Stimmen jüdischer Christen und nicht christlicher Jüdinnen zu hören.

Schlüsselwörter – Keywords

Catholicity – Baptists – free church – conciliarity – apostolic succession