

Baptists and the Uncommon Good: Outlining a Political Baptist Ecclesiology

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Introduction: Context of a Theological Inquiry

This paper can be read as a modest attempt at constructive theology, seeking to reflect on the issue of “Baptists and the common good.” Catherine Keller offers the definition of “constructive theology” which is operative here: “Constructive theology refers to the broad endeavor to situate spiritual discourse within an irreducible sense of context.”¹ The fact of being in a multicultural, “postmodern” world forces upon would-be theologians the further realization that *all* theological reflection is constructive, that is, contextual, whether it recognizes itself as such or not.² Keller implies, in a different location, what she likely intends by “context”: “All theological interpretation (at least that which recognizes itself as an interpretation rather than revelation) today exposes itself to an incalculable multiplicity of influences, movements, powers, protests, doubts, cultures, desperations, expectations.”³ The question, then, concerns awareness of one’s context, of the factors that constitute one’s theological discourse and questioning.⁴ In offering particular reflections on the theme of “Baptists and the common good,” it is therefore necessary to spend some time reflecting on the context which motivates the theological proposal that is presented in what follows.⁵

A crucial element of the context that motivates this intervention involves widespread Christian support (whether *de facto* or *de jure*) of a global U.S. neocolonialism, which is itself a continuation of the well-known historical collusion of Christianity and imperial power; such imperial power is itself indicative of a wider-scale logic of oppressive, which need not be “global” or international for its insidiousness to be appreciated. Mark Lewis Taylor provides an excellent summary of the first, most immediate, of these contextual motivations, commenting at length on the “mutual support that has flourished between Bush’s neoconservative architects of a *Pax Americana* warrior-state, on the one hand, and the millions of nationalist evangelicals, on the other...”⁶ He unleashes a litany of US evils which is worth quoting at length:

Stories in the U.S. of parents, sons, and daughters maimed by war and occupation can be multiplied a thousand times over if we examine with equal care the plight of Iraqi families. The Bush regime worked this destruction as a unilateral and preemptive enactment of a long-planned invasion, ignoring or disdaining intelligence reports indicating that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction were not an immediate threat. A wealthy President from a family that has long defended the nation’s wealthiest classes is allowed to line the pockets of the corporate class with tax cuts and reconstructive contracts for his corporate colleagues. Stoking citizen fear after 9/11, the Bush regime’s surveillance state gobbles up civil liberties—first for groups long-stigmatized by racism, then for nearly everyone.⁷

What is most significant, for Taylor and for this paper, is the role of Christians in this program. Taylor is aware that “small numbers of U.S. Christians, even the leadership of large Protestant and Catholic

churches, lifted their voices against the war in Iraq.”⁸ The fact remains, however, that “they could not rival the mix of nationalist [one could often add other descriptives, e.g., sexist, xenophobic, homophobic] evangelicalism and imperial politics...”⁹ that supported the war and the broader neoconservative policies (both domestic and foreign) of the Bush administration. On the contrary, “amid their nation’s ever more militant and aggressive imperialism, U.S. Christian and religious communities seem toothless and compliant, if not outright supportive,” with much of U.S. Christianity representing little more than “a gentlemanly club espousing notions of ‘love’ to teach empires some kinder and gentler ways.”¹⁰

Descriptions of U.S. Christian communities as “toothless and compliant” is fitting within the Baptist context: The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant and Baptist denomination in the U.S., represents a significant participant in the coalition known collectively as “the Religious Right,” modeling the latter’s virtually unwavering support of U.S. imperial rule. At its 2003 Annual Convention, for example, the SBC passed a resolution affirming the “liberation of Iraq,”¹¹ becoming one of the only major US Christian denominations to do so. Not only did the SBC pass this resolution, but President Bush and other high-ranking officials from his party are regular participants at the SBC annual conventions. This is not insignificant, illustrating both the SBC’s support of U.S. imperialistic policies and the denomination’s immense political and cultural influence. The SBC, then, provides a vivid example of the “outright support” of the Bush administration of which Taylor speaks.

Some will, no doubt, object to these statements, pointing out that neither U.S. Christianity, nor Baptists in the U.S., nor even the SBC itself constitute monolithic organizations. A temptation arises to argue that, insofar as these groups are internally heterogeneous, those who support the imperial politics, etc. of the U.S., even if they constituted a majority of U.S. Christians, would not speak on behalf of those Christians, and specifically Baptists, who disapprove of such policies. There is, in other words, a temptation to assert that “they” do not speak for “us.”

Unfortunately, such an objection bears little actual weight. Those U.S. Christians who oppose the imperialistic practices and ideology of their nation remain largely “toothless,” to echo Taylor’s term, due to the hegemonic role played by the “nationalist evangelicals” discussed above. With specific regard to Baptists, and within this hegemony of nationalist evangelicals, the SBC itself plays a hegemonic role in U.S. Baptist life. The term “hegemonic” here refers to a social process whereby the limited interests of a particular group are represented as universal, resulting in a universalizing effect brought about by that group.¹² A hegemonic articulation is thereby marked by a kind of naturalization, according to which the universality of the particular group’s interests is perceived as more than a contingent construction.

Taylor's "nationalist evangelicals" play such a role within U.S. religious life, and the SBC plays such a role within Baptist life. Concerning the latter, the interests of a majority of messengers to a national convention, of the leadership of the denomination, of one Baptist group (as constituted functionally by these messengers and leaders) among others, of a particular Christian denomination, are represented as possessing a universal validity. Thus, just as the interests of "nationalist evangelicals" are presented as the interests of Christianity *per se*, so the interests of the SBC are presented as the interests of Baptists *per se*. Thus, for example, when a "Christian perspective" concerning a particular issue is required in the media, it is invariably a representative "nationalist evangelical," very often a leader in the SBC, who is presented as spokesperson.¹³ The significance of this is that the recognition or affirmation of internal heterogeneity is, in itself, insufficient to disrupt the hegemonic articulation which presently configures U.S. Christianity in its relation to national politics. The effect of this hegemonic articulation is that the "common good" in the U.S. is equated with the interests of "nationalist evangelicals" and the SBC. That is, the limited interests of these groups, insofar as they are present as universal and desirable, come to define, hegemonically, the "common good."

In light of these considerations, Taylor poses the following disheartening question: "Is this what Christianity is, an ideology for enforcing imperial war and exploitation?"¹⁴ One could, in fact, be led to this conclusion (as many doubtless have been), for there is indeed a long Christian history of collusion with such U.S. interests.¹⁵ Keller illustrates the way in which, at least by the time that disparate "Jesus movements" had developed into "orthodoxy,"¹⁶ Christianity was already implicated in the maintenance and extension of empire: "'Theology,' a Platonic concept, effected the syncretism of a colonized Judaism with a colonizing Hellenism."¹⁷ Thus, while the absorption of an "imperial metaphysics" enabled the church to "resist the idolatry of the empire of its gods, power, wealth and conquest" until Constantine,¹⁸ the price of such absorption was ultimately very high:

With its imperial success, the church, one might argue, absorbed the *idolatry of identity*; a metaphysical Babel of unity, an identity that homogenizes the multiplicities it absorbs, that either excludes or subordinates every creaturely other, *alter*, subaltern. God was cast in the image of this ontological identity, infused with a power that could only be—lacking all receptivity and reciprocity—all-controlling. Thus the Jewish creator-judge of history was hybridized with the unmoved mover; and soon the sovereign Father of orthodoxy—"God of power and might," as many of our liturgies still chant—manfully merged with the sovereignty of the state.¹⁹ There is, then, in Keller's words, "no precolonial Christianity."²⁰ In response to Taylor's question concerning whether or not Christianity is reducible to an ideological support of empire, one could not blame those who give an affirmative response.

Hopefully, however, such a response is not required. As Keller next asks, "is there a postcolonial Christianity?"²¹ This is a question that a paper such as this cannot hope to definitively

answer. Taylor lays out the hope that there are, within the complex Christian tradition,²² communities that manifest what he calls “postcolonial *spirit*,” by which he means that they manifest “the postcolonial *ethos*,” which is an *ethos* of “differentiated liberating struggle.”²³ Nothing can undo a Christian history of “sanctioning...violence, war, repression, racism, and empire-building,” but the “counter-imperial communal formations at the genesis of Christianity” make possible the thinking of “a contemporary theology that is politically liberationist and resistant to colonizing and imperial powers.”²⁴ The thinking of such a contemporary theology is the aim in this presentation. The context of the presentation here, therefore, involves a theological response from the perspective of “defectors from imperial presumption,”²⁵ who have a crucial role to play. What is proposed here constitutes a counter-hegemonic theological formulation, according to which Baptist identity would be constituted by precisely such “defectors,” outlining an ecclesiology of a community of such defectors,²⁶ a community marked by Taylor’s *ethos* of differentiated liberating struggle.”

Jesus of Nazareth: A Model of Liberatory Praxis

The first stage in the development of this theology consists in outlining a cursory sketch of what William Herzog refers to as “the ‘world subverting’ figure” of Jesus of Nazareth, who was “executed as a political enemy of the temple state and Roman colonial rule.”²⁷ That Jesus was a political enemy follows from the fact that he proclaimed the “empire of God” (*basileia tou theou*),²⁸ which was “practiced” or “implemented” “in healings, exorcisms, feedings, and covenantal teachings”²⁹ on the part of Jesus. The proclamation of such a *basileia* was inherently political, which is to say anti-Roman, insofar as “in any Roman province, the primary referent of *basileia* would have been the *imperium Romanum*.”³⁰ In a formulation that will appear repeatedly in what follows, Herzog nicely encapsulates the understanding of Jesus of Nazareth which is axiomatic for this paper: “In what he said and did, Jesus remained a prophetic pedagogue of the oppressed engaged in the praxis of the justice of the reign of God.”³¹ Such an understanding sees in Jesus of Nazareth an example of Taylor’s *ethos* of differentiated political struggle,” and nicely encapsulates the point that the issue is not merely what Jesus *said*, but what he *did*; the significance of this latter point will become clear in due time.

Such a political reading, while certainly not exhaustive of all which may be taken from the biblical Gospels,³² and while certainly requiring further critique and extension,³³ nevertheless foregrounds the irreducibly political implications of Jesus’ of Nazareth’s life and message. Indeed, “Roman conquest and imposition of client rulers, with the resulting multiple layers of taxes and socially disintegrative economic and cultural practices, set the conditions of and for Jesus’ mission and other, parallel movements....”³⁴ Jesus acted and ministered in the context of what Richard Horsley refers to as

“the ugly underside of the Pax Romana,” marked by “disorder and devastation for subject peoples.”³⁵ Against this backdrop, he insists that “Jesus’ speeches not only address groups of people but deal with social relations in social context.”³⁶ He thus eschews the “standard approach” of viewing Jesus as “concerned primarily with individuals, both in his teachings and in his healings and exorcisms,” because such an individualistic approach would only have further aggravated the social conditions under which the people suffered.³⁷ The intended point of emphasis with this discussion is that the political context of Jesus’ life and ministry is not of secondary importance, but is constitutive of the significance of that life and ministry.

Herzog introduces three elements that would be of central importance in fleshing out and supporting the outline of Jesus of Nazareth’s ministry and teachings more fully: Healings, exorcisms, and honor-shame ripostes.³⁸ Because limited space does not allow for extended discussion of these themes, the discussion will be devoted to an examination of what are taken to be paradigmatic examples of Jesus’ prophetic ministry. These examples are the famous temple incident as presented in Mark 11:15-18, and the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12.

The temple incident of Mark 11:15-18 represents a prophetic condemnation of the temple system itself, insofar as it represented and maintained the rule of the occupying Romans and the local elites who supported them; the incident, then, has broad and significant political implications, representing an example of the “praxis of the justice of the reign of God.” Building on the insights of cultural anthropology, Herzog notes that “the religion of the temple [in ancient agrarian societies] was always political religion with economic consequences, because the temple was an instrument of the policies of the ruler and the ruling class.”³⁹ This insight is echoed by Horsley who notes that the structure of Roman empire in Galilee and Judea was “mediated through Herodian kingship and the Judean high priesthood....”⁴⁰ The result was to be expected: “The Roman imposition of Herodian client kingship in Palestine, and Herod’s retention of the temple-state, meant that the people now had multiple layers of rulers with their demands of taxes or tribute on top of tithes and offerings,”⁴¹ with the effect that peasants who existed at the subsistence level “would be expected to yield between 28 percent and 40 percent...of their subsistence stores.”⁴² This situation would have been especially acute in Galilee because it was new: Galilee had only recently come under the rule of Jerusalem with the accompanying tithes and offerings owed to the temple.⁴³

The role of the temple in relation to the economic hardships of the peasants merits further discussion. Unable to fulfill their financial obligations, “the peasants seem to have paid what they could and abandoned any efforts to pay their double tithe to the Temple,”⁴⁴ an action which entangled them in a vicious circle. Because the temple held the monopoly on forgiveness and sacrifice,⁴⁵ and because the

peasants believed that the only way to “discharge their debt” lay in fulfilling their obligations to the temple “so that the temple could operate on their behalf,”⁴⁶ then the peasants were “permanently indebted and, therefore, permanently unclean”⁴⁷ due to their failure to properly render their temple dues. This “spiritual” situation carried with it irreducibly “material” consequences:⁴⁸ To be spiritually unclean was to threaten the “fruitfulness of one’s fields and orchards,”⁴⁹ insofar as this was dependent on divine blessing. A lack of fruitfulness would then indicate a divine judgment, placing the farmer further in debt (both spiritually and materially), guaranteeing the perpetuation of the circle.

Herzog also highlights the economic role of the temple as a bank,⁵⁰ according to which the temple “served as the ‘state exchequer’ and bank for the aristocracy of Jerusalem.”⁵¹ He speculates that the temple made loans to the poor on behalf of Jerusalem’s wealthy elite,⁵² with the result that the impossible debt load of the peasants would have increased, bringing about foreclosure on the peasants’ land and increasing the holdings of the elite. Indeed, Herzog sees this as the only logical reason for offering such loans in the first place, given the virtual impossibility of their ever being repaid.⁵³ The temple therefore became a “tribute-collecting machine,”⁵⁴ a “major economic force, controlling massive amounts of money while continuing to accumulate more.”⁵⁵

It is clear that the economic description offered here is irreducibly political (as economics invariably is): “The families of the high priests and the lay aristocrats” stood “at the very apex of this system of exploitation,”⁵⁶ and the temple and its leaders were invested “with the powers and rewards of a collaborating aristocracy.”⁵⁷ In this regard, the temple usefully served its two most important functions: “To legitimate a particular regime and to mystify its exploitation by re-presenting it in the form of obligation to God or the gods.”⁵⁸ The rulers and those who benefited from this system of economic exploitation received the legitimation of ruling “by the mandate of heaven or the will of the gods or the election of Yahweh.”⁵⁹ In sum, the temple system ensured the perpetuation of the economic exploitation of the people under Roman occupation, legitimated this exploitation and, following from this, the structure of life under Roman rule. The physical organization of the temple is also relevant in this regard, insofar as it legitimated the social structuring which was modeled on it. A social structure marked by “interlocking and mutually reinforcing hierarchies” and “relative degrees of cleanness and purity” was embodied in the temple, lending legitimacy to “the varying forms this structuring would take, whether at the hands of the Roman colonial administrators, Herod Antipas, or the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem.”⁶⁰

In light of these observations, Herzog interprets the temple incident as “an enacted parable or prophetic sign of God’s judgment on it [the temple] and, therefore, of its impending destruction.”⁶¹ Jesus’ actions and the accompanying saying are related to the political and economic role of the temple

in maintaining the imperial power of Rome and her allies. Further, in light of the considerations given above, Horsley correctly asserts that “the people whom Jesus addressed would have expected and welcomed a condemnation of the high priests, perhaps of the Temple itself, as well as of Roman rule.”⁶²

This brings the discussion to a consideration of Jesus’ saying and action in the temple incident. In verse 17, Jesus famously states that “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of robbers,”⁶³ a saying formed by combining Jeremiah 7:11 and Isaiah 56:7. Concerning the former, Herzog understands Jesus’ as referring to bands of “social bandits,” who were “accused of plundering, pillage, and other forms of outrage against peasant and ruler alike.”⁶⁴ The statement enacts a reversal of social locations: “The prominent members of the ruling class viewed the social bandits as deviant outlaws and deplored their acts, but Jesus wryly suggests that the real social bandits are not to be found hiding in the caves of the Judean wilderness or Arbela.” On the contrary, “the chief priests, the very paradigms of rectitude, are the social bandits creating havoc in the land. They are the true deviants!”⁶⁵ Jesus likens those who benefit from the temple system to bandits because they are involved “in actively extracting all but a subsistence from the poor.”⁶⁶ Isaiah 56:1-8, the source of the other part of Jesus’ saying, constitutes a prophetic message against the isolationism of Ezra and Nehemiah after the return to the land from the Babylonian captivity.⁶⁷ This signifies, for Herzog, a God “who abrogates and creates anew,”⁶⁸ even if it involves a radical reappraisal of the application of the law.⁶⁹ Such a reading, in Herzog’s estimation, “fits the shape and themes of Jesus’ ministry to the outcasts and the marginal, those who because of their uncleanness and cultic impurity were either banned from the community of Israel or pushed to its very edge.”⁷⁰ That is, Jesus indicates God’s acceptance of those who, on purely legal terms, are not acceptable.

Jesus’ actions in the temple incident also fit into this pattern of prophetic condemnation. In undertaking the actions he did, Jesus was “effectively blocking the normal operations integral to (not corruptions of!) the functioning of the religious political-economy of the Temple, such as money changing and the selling of doves”⁷¹ and was not attacking mere peripheries of temple worship.⁷² In addition, “all the functionaries mentioned in the incident in the temple were part of this system and served it,”⁷³ thereby demonstrating their complicity with the exploitation of the people. The results of the disruption enacted by Jesus were therefore very significant, striking at “the very heart of the sacrificial system itself,”⁷⁴ and “reverberat[ing] all the way to the altar in the court of the priests.”⁷⁵ Jesus’ actions, insofar as they disrupted the very functioning of the temple, enacted his prophetic judgment on the temple, in line with his previous saying.

As a whole, the incident indicates Jesus’ belief that “the temple was no longer necessary.”⁷⁶ Jesus’ prophetic statements and actions in the temple incident constitute a condemnation of the structure

of the temple, the Empire from which it profited and which it supported, and the broader social structure it modeled, as such.⁷⁷ The temple incident illustrates a vivid (perhaps the most vivid) example of Jesus as Herzog's "prophetic pedagogue of the praxis of the justice of the reign of God." When Herzog writes that "when Jesus took action against the temple...he touched a raw nerve" on the part of the Jerusalem elites,⁷⁸ it seems he makes an understatement, to say the least; the temple incident is so significant that, in the gospel presentation, Jesus' actions place his life irrevocably in danger (Mark 11:18).

Jesus' healings lend themselves to an interpretation in line with that of the temple incident. Although only one specific example can be considered here, it demonstrates continuity with the significance of Jesus of Nazareth as outlined to this point, and is again paradigmatic of the reading adopted in this paper. The example in question is the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12.⁷⁹ Herzog raises the question as to why, if Jesus announces that God, not he, has healed the man (by using the "divine passive"), he is nevertheless accused of blasphemy by the scribes (vv. 5-6).⁸⁰ His answer is that, whether the scribes in the story are thought to be village scribes or representatives from Jerusalem, "they do appear in this account as guardians of the great tradition and protectors of the temple's interests"⁸¹ and, as such, "from their point of view, the temple is the only place where sins can be forgiven and purity restored."⁸² Their intent, then, is to protect their monopoly in mediating God to the people: "In their eyes, Jesus, who is not from a priestly family, has no right to place himself in the position of a priest announcing God's forgiveness."⁸³ They therefore seek to preserve the whole oppressive system, from which they directly benefit, in its relation to the temple.

Framing the issue in terms of patronage, Herzog notes that "Yahweh the Lord was the patron of the Judean people, and the people were his clients."⁸⁴ Patronage, however, was always mediated through brokers, and "in Jerusalem, the priests claimed to be the sole brokers of Yahweh's patronage."⁸⁵ Without the intermediacy of the broker, the people had no access to "the *charis* of the patron God." Thus, "when Jesus declares God's forgiveness of the paralytic's sins (debts), he steps into the role of a reliable broker of God's forgiveness, and by simply assuming this role, challenges the brokerage house in Jerusalem called the temple."⁸⁶ Effectively, then, "Jesus proposes a strategy of bypassing the temple and establishing another means of access to the forgiving Patron through his own brokering."⁸⁷ As such, Jesus again acts as a prophet engaged in, "the praxis of the justice of the reign of God."

In addition to the bypassing of the temple, the healing also involves the reintegration of paralytic into social wholeness. Herzog notes, building on anthropological insights, notes the operative distinction between illness and disease "disease is a physical condition, but illness is a social condition in which 'social networks have been disrupted and meaning lost.'"⁸⁸ In stating that the man's debts have been discharged, Jesus undoes the illness of the man, restoring him to social wholeness. The incident

also represents an honor-shame riposte in which Jesus has thrown an honor challenge before the scribes: “What the temple has failed to do, Jesus declares done.”⁸⁹ While the healing of illness is the most significant element of the conflict, it would not be accomplished if the healing of disease did not take place as well: “Without the healing, the conflict degenerates into a war of words, ‘I say, you say,’ and the man remains paralyzed on his mat.”⁹⁰ The healing therefore “indicates that God’s power is at work, confirming the identity and role of Jesus as a legitimate broker, and it completes the work of Jesus the traditional healer who, having addressed the more important questions of illness, can now heal the disease.”⁹¹

Herzog therefore draws out the full implications of this scene, noting that while it is tempting to focus in the healing of the disease, the significance of the healing of the illness is the most important. He quotes N. T. Wright to make this point:

The effect of these cures...was not merely to bring physical healing;...but to reconstitute those healed as members of the people of Israel’s God....The vindication for which Israel looked to her god was being brought forward into the present, close up, in the case of these individuals.⁹² He goes on to say that “this was especially poignant because those healed had been banned from honorable status in the people of God by virtue of their deformity or disease.”⁹³ But, perhaps most significantly, “these events did not take place in a vacuum; they were challenges to the temple, subversive of its claims and corrosive of its power.”⁹⁴ In light of the above discussion of the temple incident, they should be viewed as enacting liberative praxis and, with it, judgment upon the divine brokerage system operative in Judea, together with the social order it legitimized, especially insofar as it support the Roman Empire and its local elites.⁹⁵

With this discussion of the temple incident and the healing of the paralytic in mind, Herzog is correct in noting that “the Jerusalem elites had reasons enough to collaborate with their Roman overlords to execute the troublesome prophet from Nazareth;”⁹⁶ that is, Jesus’ of Nazareth’s liberative praxis constituted enough of a threat to the power elite and the system that gave them legitimacy that they had ample reason to respond as they did. Herzog is also correct to note that Jesus’ trial was not a “trial” in the contemporary sense, but was a show of “political loyalty;”⁹⁷ Rome’s servants and those who benefited from her rule responded as one would expect. It was, as he notes, one thing for Jesus to challenge the power of the elites in Galilee and Judea, but quite another to challenge the more powerful elites in Jerusalem.⁹⁸ “When Jesus undermined the temple and called its legitimacy into question, he threatened the most powerful group in Judea,” who also, not coincidentally, “represented the interests of Rome.”⁹⁹ And Jesus *did* pose a threat to Rome, insofar as, by refusing to accede to the paying of tribute and by threatening to destroy the Temple, he threatened Rome’s “tributary supply lines.”¹⁰⁰ As a result, a show trial took place, the purpose of which was not to “try” Jesus (his fate was already decided), but to

“exhibit what happens to those who step out of their station and claim a role for which they were not authorized.”¹⁰¹ As Herzog goes on to note, the question is properly phrased as *what*, as opposed to *who*, executed Jesus of Nazareth. He was executed by the Roman Empire, which is to say by an entire imperial structure, because he posed a threat to the order of empire.¹⁰² Jesus “was a subversive power whose actions threatened to disrupt the hieratic hierarchy of the temple and colonial control of Rome;”¹⁰³ his actions constituted a liberative praxis that threatened an oppressive system, and the system responded accordingly.

Participation in God through the Imitation of Jesus of Nazareth: Advancing the Uncommon Good

The proposal to be developed in what follows is that the church is best conceived as a community constituted by the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, and that such imitation constitutes a participation in the very life of God. The execution of Jesus at the hands of empire was not, of course, the end of the story for his earliest followers; had this been the case, Jesus of Nazareth would simply have failed in the ultimate honor-shame riposte and the logic of empire and oppression would simply have claimed one more victim. Contrary to this, in the event of Jesus’ resurrection,¹⁰⁴ the early community of Jesus’ followers experienced a vindication of Jesus’ prophetic life and message. This experience and vindication was taken to have monumental theological consequences. John D. Caputo captures the significance of this experience, noting that Jesus’ earliest followers came to believe that what was experienced in “the invisible depths of the extraordinary man, was a glimpse of the face of God.”¹⁰⁵ In light of the event of Jesus’ resurrection, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, over time, came to affirm the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and God.

Jesus of Nazareth was conceived as being identical with the God he referred to as “father,” and the “spirit” of Jesus which marked his presence even in his non-presence was seen as the “spirit of God,” or “holy spirit.” Stated differently, the conviction arose that Jesus of Nazareth was to be identified with the divine economy of God’s relations with the world. But this “economic” experience of God was taken as indicative of the “immanent” nature of God. That is, the conviction arose that “God” was to be understood through the complex experience of Jesus of Nazareth in his life, death, and resurrection, that “the very being of God must correspond in some way to their experience of God as a father, Son, and Spirit.”¹⁰⁶

The experience of Jesus of Nazareth, in other words, moves Christian thought to consider the doctrine of the Trinity. The British Baptist theologian Paul S. Fiddes provides a trinitarian theology that will be of vital importance in what follows.¹⁰⁷ Fiddes affirms that Christians came to hold that “in

his self-unveiling God has revealed himself as triune, existing in three modes of being characterized by relationship,”¹⁰⁸ and seeks to develop this notion in a direction that moves “from an ontology of substance to one of event, from the static to the dynamic....”¹⁰⁹ Fiddes tries to develop a formulation that “eludes being objectified as either a numerically single ‘I’ or three individual ‘I’s,” and instead chooses to speak of “three ‘*movements* of being characterized by relationship,’ or more simply ‘movements of relationship.’”¹¹⁰ To do this, he identifies the notions of “person” and “relation” more radically than is common in contemporary trinitarian theology,¹¹¹ arguing that God is triune in the sense of being constituted by three *relations*, and not by three individuals who *have* relations.¹¹² Accordingly, Fiddes articulates a notion according to which “the *hypostases* or ‘distinct identities’ in God have their very being through their mutual self-distinction from each other and their relation to each other,”¹¹³ modifying the classical Western formulation of “three relationships subsisting in one being” to something like “three movements of relationship subsisting in one event.”¹¹⁴ There is then, in Fiddes’ articulation, no common “essence” or “substance” in which these three movements participate, nor are there three substances or essences that relate to one another. Rather, God is understood to “complex personality.”¹¹⁵

One of the most significant, fruitful and intriguing elements of Fiddes’ proposal is his insistence that God’s is triunity cannot be objectively represented, but rather involves a process in which one can only participate. He notes that “it is not possible to visualize, paint, or etch in stone or glass three interweaving ‘relationships’ without personal agents who exercise them, or three ‘movement of being’ characterized by their relations.”¹¹⁶ Fiddes does not count this as a substantial critique, however; on the contrary, he critiques the kind of “spectatorial empiricism” which such a view represents, according to which “observation has been made the basic paradigm of knowledge,” with the consequence that “knowledge takes the form of subjecting objects to the control of our consciousness, as things that can either be seen with the eyes or ‘seen’ (conceptualized) in the mind; correspondingly, the task of language is to *represent* what has been perceived as accurately as possible.”¹¹⁷ In contrast to such a view, Fiddes insists that “God cannot be known and spoken about in this way, and realizing this should also open up other dimensions in our knowledge of the world around us,”¹¹⁸ and it is just such an “other dimension” of knowing that Fiddes seeks to articulation in relation to God. Thus, “speaking about God as ‘an event of relationships’ is not the language of a spectator, but the language of participation. This sort of talk only makes sense in terms of our *involvement* in the network of relationships in which God happens.”¹¹⁹

This notion of participation and divine “happening” will be vital in what follows. Before elaborating that notion, however, it is necessary to identify the nature of the intra-divine relations as

Fiddes understands them. Fiddes understands the “nature” of God “as complex personality, as an interweaving (*perichoresis*) of relationships, as movements of a giving and receiving within the life of God which is love,”¹²⁰ of “movements of love which are like the relationship between a Father and a Son in the expectation and openness of Spirit...,”¹²¹ typifying the interplay of these movements as a “divine dance.”¹²² Thus, the Trinity is conceived as involving “a movement of relationship like that from a father to a son (‘Father’), a movement like from a son to a father (‘Son’), and an opening up of these relationships to new depths and new possibilities (‘Spirit’).”¹²³ There is therefore “a movement of self-giving like that of a father sending forth a son, a movement which in traditional language is named ‘eternal generation’ and ‘temporal mission,’”¹²⁴ an interplay of relations involving “movements of speech, empathy, and actions, in which we are invited to share.”¹²⁵ Reconnecting this immanent nature of God with the economic experience of God, Fiddes explicitly connects this inner movement of God to Jesus of Nazareth: He articulates “the complete identity of the eternal movement of sonship in the person of Jesus Christ (‘incarnation’)...”¹²⁶ There appears, he says, “to be no gap between the ‘immanent’ and the ‘economic’ Trinity.”¹²⁷

It is to this identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the inner movements of the triune life of God that the discussion must now turn. Building from Fiddes’ proposal, Jesus of Nazareth, in his human life, may be understood as participating “without remainder” in a movement immanent to God, which is “like” a father sending a son, and “like” a son responding to the sending of the father. It is important to note that Fiddes is clear that Jesus is not thought to have *imitated* the divine life, but to have *participated* in it. This means that, if one follows Fiddes in referring to God in terms of something that “happens,” rather than as something that “is,” then the participation of Jesus of Nazareth in the movements of the trinitarian divine life constitutes the “happening” of God. If Jesus is understood as Herzog’s “prophetic pedagogue of the oppressed engaged in the praxis of the justice of the reign of God,” then it follows that, *as* this prophet, undertaking this praxis, Jesus of Nazareth constituted the happening of God in the world. Further, if Jesus of Nazareth, in this praxis, constituted a perfect participation in the immanent life of God, as attested in the event of resurrection, then this praxis is indicative of the inner life of God, following from the equivalence of the economic and immanent Trinity.

The preceding paragraph illustrates a kind of movement from the world to God. But consideration of a further identification illustrates a corresponding movement from God to the world. It has already come into view that Jesus of Nazareth is identified by Christians as identical to God. But Jesus of Nazareth also famously makes another telling statement of identification: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine [i.e. the hungry, the thirsty, and naked, i.e., the victims of oppression], you did for me.” (Matt. 25: 40). If Jesus is identified with “the least of these,” on the one

hand, and with the very inner life constitutive of God, on the other, then there is an identification of the inner life of God with “the least of these” as well. The significance of this latter point is that the happening of God coincides with Jesus’ praxis on behalf of “the least of these,” which to say that the happening of God coincides with praxis contesting oppression.

What is proposed here is that such participation is not limited to Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, praxis which imitates that of Jesus of Nazareth constitutes human participation in the inner trinitarian life of God. Given that there is, in God, an “ecstatic [*ek-stasis*] movement of love which draws the creation into fellowship with God’s own self,”¹²⁸ the suggestion here is that praxis undertaken in imitation of Jesus’ own constitutes this experience of being drawn into the intra-trinitarian life of God. To reiterate, the Trinity is not taken here as a “‘model’ for human relationships to imitate....”¹²⁹ Rather, God is “a reality which can only be apprehended by participation.”¹³⁰ Thus, just as Jesus of Nazareth in his life did not merely imitate the divine life, but participated in it, so human imitation of Jesus of Nazareth constitutes participation in the divine, and not mere imitation. God is best conceived not as an object, being, or person to be spoken of or described, but as a happening in which humans may participate.¹³¹

An important clarification must be introduced at this point: Human imitation of Jesus’ prophetic life involves imitation as *extension*, and not as mere *repetition*. This notion requires some elaboration and defense. Strictly speaking, imitation of Jesus’ life, taken in the sense of “repetition,” is both impossible and undesirable: Impossible because such action could only be undertaken in a context identical to that of Jesus of Nazareth (e.g., it is not now possible to contest the policies of the Roman Empire, to contest the role of the temple in an ancient agrarian society, etc.), undesirable because any meaningful social praxis (e.g., the contestation of contemporary U.S. neo-imperialism, contestation of the destructive effects of global capital, efforts to reverse the effects of global warming, etc.) would be closed off in the contemporary context. Jesus of Nazareth represents, then, something of a “style,” a trajectory, one might say a “spirit,” that both transcends his immediate historical context and constitutes participation in the divine.

The idea is captured usefully in Fiddes’ insistence that what is significant in participation in the divine life is the *pattern* of relations. He writes, for example, that concerning the metaphor of a dance, the analogy to be drawn between the divine life and human lives is the movement of the dance: “The closest analogy is the with perichoretic *movements* in human life, not with the *movers*.”¹³² Stated somewhat differently, Fiddes writes that “the analogy or ‘family resemblance’ created by the gracious presence of God in human community must surely always lie between human *relations* and divine *relations*.”¹³³ This means that what matters are *actions* that are undertaken, not the nature or essence of

the persons undertaking them. This latter point indicates that relations which participate in the perichoretic relations of God are those that contest oppressive power for the sake of “the least of these;” what constitutes participation in the trinitarian relations is Herzog’s “praxis of the justice of the reign of God.”

Recognition of this point allows for a notion of imitation as something other than mere repetition. What still requires further development is the notion of the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth as constituted through an extension of his praxis. This notion will be developed by considering the political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as a model for understanding the opening of the parent-child relations in the trinity to “new depths and new possibilities,” as discussed above.¹³⁴

Fiddes’ discussion of the Spirit brings into view something of what is intended here with this notion of the opening of God to new possibilities. He highlights the multitude of “impersonal,” “impressionistic images” used to represent the Spirit, for example, “a breeze blowing gently, a gale uprooting everything in its path, a breath stirring in the body, oil trickling, fire warming and fire burning fiercely, water refreshing and flowing water in which we are immersed, wings beating and wings brooding.”¹³⁵ Fiddes speaks of “the pattern of movement of the Spirit in the world is the opening up of personal and social being, freeing us from structures of the present and turning us to future possibilities.”¹³⁶ The point being made here is that the multivalent, sometimes contradictory nature of these images indicates an unappropriable, unpredictable dynamism to the Spirit. What is suggested here is that there is a “future” to God, in the sense of being opened in increasingly new, unpredictable, and radically unforeseeable ways. What this means is that, while the life of Jesus of Nazareth constitutes the trajectory of what it means to imitate it, the directions taken by this trajectory, and thus what constitutes praxis of participation in the divine, remain open. What the relations of the divine *are* is not what they may become;¹³⁷ the diversity and polyvalence of the images also ensure that the trajectory of what God may become is not simply given or programmed.¹³⁸

What is being advanced here is a further extension of this notion of the “praxis of the justice of the reign of God,” to the point where the necessarily historically limited praxis of Jesus of Nazareth is extended to something like Taylor’s “differentiated liberating struggle,”¹³⁹ “differentiated” in the sense that such praxis is operative along axes that are multiplied, more extensive, and therefore more differentiated than those which marked the action of Jesus of Nazareth. The suggestion is that such praxis is constant in that it is always undertaken for “the least of these;” it is fluid, however, in that “the least of these” is not a static category, but can itself be extended. If the divine relations are importantly related to the “the least of these,” as argued above, then an extension of this category constitutes the coming into being of new dimensions of divine relationality, both “immanent” to God and in God’s

“economic” relation with the world. Such an extension, then, constitutes the movement of the Spirit further opening the intra-trinitarian relations of God.

The way in which this extension takes place is developed through a consideration of the political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.¹⁴⁰ Working from the theory of Jacques Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe outline a social theory according to which any and every social identity is a function of context, that is, dependent on the totality of the signifying field within which it is located and its difference from the other elements within that field. Social identities accordingly do not pre-exist relative to these fields, but are *constituted* through their relation to the other elements in them. Such identities would only be completely fixed if the social fields in which they are constituted were, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology, “sutured,” that is, completely closed. But social fields are never completely, but only relatively, closed, with the effect that social identity is never completely fixed but is always in a state of flux.

The instability of the contextual field is the condition of possibility for the contestation of hierarchical social relations.¹⁴¹ In a completely sutured social field, for example, inegalitarian relations, while necessarily being relations of subordination, would be “natural,” and would therefore not be constituted as “oppressive” relations. Such relations’ transition from being merely subordinate to being oppressive depends upon their denaturalization, which is brought about through the disruption of a contextual field by bringing it into contact with an alternative discursive field.¹⁴² Of specific concern for Laclau and Mouffe is the rising of democratic discourse (which is symbolized for them in the Declaration of the Rights of Man), which has a “profound subversive power”¹⁴³ insofar as it advocates egalitarian relations and thus creates the potential for relations of subordination to be constituted as oppressive relations, thereby allowing the social space for their contestation. Laclau and Mouffe advocate what they call an “irradiation effect”¹⁴⁴ of this democratic subversion of naturalized relations of subordination, according to which there is a progression “from the critique of political inequality” to the “displacement towards the critique of economic inequality,” which then leads to “the putting in question of other forms of subordination and the demanding of new rights.”¹⁴⁵ What Laclau and Mouffe see as the potential in a world marked by an increasing plurality of discursive fields is therefore an extension of egalitarianism to further and further ranges of social relations.¹⁴⁶

The suggestion being offered here is that Laclau and Mouffe’s theory offers a useful model for understanding the extension of Jesus’ prophetic ministry. If “the least of these” are understood as those who are oppressed, then the extension of the category of the oppressed, brought about by the irradiation of subversive democratic discourse, constitutes an extension of the category of “the least of these.” Furthermore, if Jesus is taken to be involved in “the praxis of the justice of the reign of God,” an

expansion of the category of the oppressed constitutes an expansion of the field of Christian praxis undertaken in the imitation of Jesus. Likewise, stated from the side of the divine life, the extension of the category of the oppressed, and therefore the expansion of a logic of egalitarian relations to include more and more social identities, means that the happening that is God is likewise extended to praxis engaged in contesting the oppression of these various groups. Such an extension is represented in the image of the Holy Spirit as the opening of the trinitarian relations in newer, deeper, and more expansive directions. Extension of the praxis of contesting oppressive social relations thereby constitutes participation in the becoming of God, insofar as the trinitarian relations are constituted in new and previously unforeseen directions. With this in view, it is clear why the praxis of the church must consist in the extensive imitation of Jesus' prophetic activity. In addition to the trajectory of expansion noted previously, the church should be about the liberatory praxis of previously unrecognized oppressed groups,¹⁴⁷ whether the identity of those groups is defined in terms of gender, sexuality, class, or in being a part of the non-human creation (e.g., as in various ecological and animal right movements).

If the identity of the church is constituted through participation in the trinitarian life of God, in Taylor's "differentiated liberating struggle," and if the kind of radically egalitarian political praxis outlined and advocated by Laclau and Mouffe constitutes the event of God, then participation in such political praxis is to be the constituting mark of the church. If, as noted above, the trinitarian life of God involves an ecstatic movement of love, pushing beyond God's self to the oppressed, then the identity of the church is to be marked by an ecstatic movement of praxis contesting oppression.¹⁴⁸ If the notion of participation in the divine is to be differentiated from the mere imitation of God as a "model," then participation in such social praxis is neither secondary nor optional.¹⁴⁹

In response to Taylor's question, posed in the Introduction, this ecclesiology allows for an understanding of the Christian church which is something other than "an ideology for enforcing imperial war and exploitation." On the contrary, the church is constituted through its praxis contesting oppression in all its forms, including imperial exploitation and war.¹⁵⁰ This model also allows for a notion of the church that moves beyond general and abstract espousals of "love"¹⁵¹ to concrete actions of liberating praxis in the world. In a world where oppressive structures and practices are naturalized to the point that they are taken as natural, desirable and, thereby, good, such a model constitutes a challenge to the status quo. If, in other words, "the common good" refers to what commonly passes for good (i.e., the status quo), this is an ecclesiology of the "uncommon good."

Responding in Freedom: A Baptist Ecclesiology for the Uncommon Good

The final task that remains is to articulate why Baptists, in particular, should be uniquely suited to this ecclesiological vision. Bill J. Leonard writes that, “Baptist have demonstrated beliefs and practices so diverse as to make it difficult to compile a consistent list of distinctives applicable to all segments of the movement at all times.”¹⁵² This is a common sentiment among Baptist historians: If there is one thing upon which students of Baptist history are likely to agree, it is that Baptists are marked by an irreducible diversity of views concerning faith and practice. Numerous studies offer lists of “Baptist distinctives,” but even concerning these, many affirm that what marks Baptists is a kind of “style.”¹⁵³ There is no doubt that the specific concerns that motivate one to write will be determinative in considering just how this “style” should be articulated in a particular time and place. What is proposed here is that the element of their complex inheritance that should be affirmed by Baptists, at least in the United States at this historical moment, is a spirit of freedom or voluntarism. If it is the case, as Walter Shurden maintains, that “every generation of Baptists must seek to make the essence of Baptist life understandable to its day,”¹⁵⁴ then the principle of freedom constitutes what this paper takes to be of essential importance for contemporary Baptist faith and practice.

Walter Shurden and Charles W. Deweese both support this position. Shurden writes that “I see ‘voluntarism’ as the glue that holds the ‘convictional genes’ [of Baptist throughout their complex history] together.”¹⁵⁵ Deweese sees the principle of freedom as that which allows the articulation of other cherished Baptist principles and is worth quoting at length:

Elements of freedom saturate such Baptist concepts as the “new birth” of salvation, soul freedom and competency, liberty of conscience, voluntarism in faith and practice, redemption and salvation, believer’s baptism, the priesthood of all believers, religious freedom, separation of church and state, support for non-conformity and right to dissent, congregational church government, equality of church members, freedom of worship and interpretation of scripture, voluntary confessions of faith, rights for women, freedom of expression in classrooms, pews, pulpits, and publications, freedom from oppression, and protection of individual and group rights.¹⁵⁶

A discussion of the debate concerning the issue of “freedom” in contemporary U.S. Baptist life cannot be undertaken here. Rather, it must suffice to state that the essential correctness of Deweese’s general sentiment is accepted here (albeit with some particular elaborations to be outlined below) and that many of the marks of Baptists he enumerates in the above quotation are conducive to the ecclesiology outlined to this point.

A brief consideration of some of these resemblances will illustrate the point. A Baptist emphasis on the separation of church and state and the non-compulsory nature of participation in the life of the church create the space for the ecclesial prophetic praxis of contesting oppression state. Freedom in the interpretation of scripture allows the space for new and disruptive scriptural readings which contest readings supporting the oppressive status quo along multiple axes. The support of non-conformity and

the right to dissent is crucial, both as an affirmation with application to the relation of Baptist churches to the broader social context in which they are located, and as an affirmation of prophetic individuals within Baptist churches who seek to contest complacency where it continues to support oppression and thereby limited the movement of the Spirit in extending the intra-trinitarian relations of God (e.g., supporting the oppression of women and sexual minorities within the church, supporting the corrupt and oppressive economic policies of the present U.S. administration, etc.). An affirmation of the liberty of conscience, together with other of these elements, ensures the prophetic potential that can be unleashed as all Christians attempt to, borrowing a phrase (though not its context) from Paul, “work out their salvation in fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). An emphasis on freedom allows for the free expression, ecclesially and individually, of opposition to worldly oppression.

None of these affirmations need be taken as blanket affirmations of a liberal Enlightenment individualism that reduces the social, including Christian congregations, to mere aggregates of individuals,¹⁵⁷ nor need it reduce the community to a “voluntary society,” a notion of which Fiddes is rightly critical.¹⁵⁸ What it seeks to emphasize, on the contrary, is a kind of sociality that seeks to respond the stirring of an unpredictable and unforeseeable divine Spirit, even if such response calls its current sociality and structure into question. What it seeks to emphasize is an affirmation, in principle, of the disruption that is brought about through prophetic witness, precisely when this cuts across the majority church view. What it emphasizes is an openness to disrupting the tyranny of the majority that can so easily arise in any ecclesial context; that is, freedom provides the possibility of Baptist congregations’ calling of themselves and their own assurances into question. An emphasis on freedom opens Baptist churches to their own self-contestation.¹⁵⁹ What must be insisted upon is that, in a time marked by the hegemony of Baptist support of U.S. oppression and empire as embodied in the SBC, the affirmation of freedom of dissent is what must be cultivated among Baptists in the U.S.

A voluntaristic notion of Baptist identity therefore lends itself to an understanding of Baptist churches as inherently political institutions which naturally lend themselves to the kind of ecclesiology outlined above, as can be seen in a brief consideration of the practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. A focus on Baptist voluntarism allows for an understanding of baptism as involving decision to enter into the community constituted by participate in the intra-trinitarian divine movements through the imitation and extension of Jesus of Nazareth’s prophetic praxis of contesting oppression. As such, entrance into the Baptist community is inherently political, in that it necessarily involves a decision to dwell in God through such praxis.

The language of “decision” should not be taken in a simply individualistic, autonomous sense; entry into the community, the decision to follow Jesus’ prophetic path, will no doubt be undertaken as a

response to what is experienced as a solicitation, as a call, as the disruption of an event¹⁶⁰ that disrupts all expectations and assurances.¹⁶¹ But such a “call” presupposes a “response” undertaken in freedom.¹⁶² “Believer’s baptism” represents just such a free response, which takes the form of a decision to follow in the pattern of Jesus of Nazareth, and to enter into the community that is constituted around such a decision; this seems to follow from the historic Baptist insistence that “baptism should follow, not precede, a confession of faith.”¹⁶³ Insofar as the decision to enter the community of the church, as outlined above, will almost necessarily involve significant conflict with one’s broader culture or state, this decision is ultimately political. Such decision is the decision to live according to Taylor’s *ethos* of differentiated liberating struggle. To be “baptized into Christ’s death” (Rom. 6:3) indicates following in Jesus’ “differentiated liberating struggle,” while “being raised” to “walk in the newness of life” (Rom. 6:4) indicates participation in the divine vindication of Jesus’ praxis.

This formulation is not as novel as it may appear: Believer’s baptism has *always* been an irreducibly political act, insofar as it has traditionally represented, for Baptists, an “outward and visible sign” of the experience of divine grace,¹⁶⁴ lending baptism a public and visible status. In the understanding outlined here, baptism constitutes a public enactment of an ecstatic identification with “the least of these” and to the contestation of the social and political forces that would marginalize them; baptism is a public enactment of commitment to “the uncommon good.” It seems, then, that the understanding of baptism outlined in the previous paragraphs evinces a great compatibility with traditional Baptist understandings of baptism, especially in light of the historical experience of the many Baptists who suffered the political consequences of their public enactment of discipleship in believer’s baptism.

If believer’s baptism represents the inherently political decision to participate in the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, and thereby to enter into the community constituted through such praxis, the Lord’s Supper represents a performance of the ongoing commitment of this political community to such praxis and, through it, to participating in the life of God. The call to “remembrance” of Jesus of Nazareth (1 Cor. 11:24) does not only involve a backward glance; on the contrary, the significance of the past and present are dictated by the future. That is, the “history” of Jesus of Nazareth and the trajectory of his liberatory praxis are not simply given to the present generation, nor do they mechanistically determine its course. As Jacques Derrida writes, “inheritance is not reducible to receiving.” Rather, “when we inherit, we don’t simply passively receive something. We choose, we select, we reaffirm. So at the heart of the experience of inheritance you have a decision to reaffirm, to select, to filter, to interpret.”¹⁶⁵ The significance of Jesus of Nazareth, the significance of his “memory,” is thereby given by what is done with the inheritance the church has received. To “remember” Jesus of Nazareth in his prophetic

contestation of oppression is to enact a commitment to continue in the imitation of that contestation; it is the future of this imitation that determines the significance of Jesus' past. The language of "proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26) involves the commitment of continuing in imitation, the commitment to enact Jesus' "coming" in every act of "differentiated liberating struggle."¹⁶⁶ It is a commitment to enact the "coming" of Christ, insofar as all such praxis involves those it serves in the very life of God, and insofar all such praxis constitutes an *eschaton*, that is, the end of a particular state of affairs.

Conclusion: A Counter-Hegemonic Hope

In conclusion, it is instructive to give renewed consideration to some of the comments made in the Introduction. Several points are noting. The first was the question of whether or not Christianity, given its dominant expression in the United States and its historical incarnation as "Christendom," is reducible to an "ideology for enforcing imperial war and exploitation" or, in Keller's related formation, whether a post-colonial Christian theology was possible. The second, more specific, point was that the SBC plays a hegemonic role in U.S. religion, according to which its particular interests and theology, which support U.S. neo-imperialism and other forms of oppressive practice, are represented as universal, as representing Baptists (or Christians) as a whole. Finally, the point was made that Christian voices which would, and do, contest evangelical nationalist and SBC hegemony have been rendered largely "toothless," and that the mere recognition of heterogeneity within the totality of U.S. Christians is not, in itself, sufficient to disrupt those hegemonic articulations.

The goal of this paper, modest though it may be, has been to provide a theological model that might give real political and theological teeth to those heterogeneous Christian communities and individuals in the U.S. who want to meaningfully contest the hegemony of those who would extend and support oppressive structures their name. It remains true that, as noted in the Introduction, simply recognizing heterogeneity does not amount to the articulation of counter-hegemonic discourses. What is required, in the present context, is the development of a *praxis* which is capable of disrupting such hegemonic discourse. In a Christian context, it is also vital that such an alternative praxis be elaborated theologically; any model of praxis that can be vilified as "anti-Christian" or non-theological is more easily marginalized, thereby maintaining the current hegemonic order. The hope is that what is offered here may provide one resource for such praxis, one that, because it is theologically articulated, cannot be simply dismissed as "anti-Christian" or "anti-Baptist." The hope is that U.S. Christians who would oppose oppressive structures and policies, and specifically Baptists, would find their Christian identity

in the contestation of the dominant order. By undertaking “differentiated liberating struggle” against oppression, by advancing the “uncommon good” against a “common good” which is nothing more than a cover for the hegemonic interests of a few, the hope is that Baptists will find an identity that can be differentiated from the dominant hegemony of the SBC. It is left to the reader to determine whether or not this hope is justified.

Notes

¹ Catherine Keller, “The Love of Postcolonialism: Theology in the Interstices of Empire,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 224.

² There is never theological articulation that is not constructive, which simply involves the articulation of revelation, or scripture, etc. Rather, every theology is constructive in the sense of elevating particular currents in the complex of Christian traditions over others, of advancing particular textual trajectories over others, etc. For a much more detailed discussion of issues related to this point, see note 32.

³ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2002), 5.

⁴ This paper has been written with the expectation that many who will read it may have questions concerning the philosophical and theological perspectives which inform it. Due to the brevity of the paper, these perspectives cannot be addressed in the body of the text. Therefore, a number of the notes that follow contain more detailed discussion of these issues, as well as reference to some the works that have been instructive in the formulation of this paper. Apology is offered in advance for the detail and length of some of the notes. Readers are urged to use them as they see fit, taking advantage of them if they are found to be helpful, and bypassing them if they are found to be distracting or cumbersome.

⁵ It is also worth noting that such contextual elaboration dispels the comforts of remaining vague or ambiguous in terms of one’s theological affirmations; this, by definition, implies the risk of offending. It is hoped that those reading this paper who might take it as offensive will instead accept it as a provocation in the most positive sense of the term, i.e., as a stirring up or an arousal that spawns further reflection on the issues raised here.

⁶ Mark Lewis Taylor, “Spirit and Liberation: Achieving Postcolonial Theology in the United States,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 40.

⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

⁹ *Ibid*, 40-41.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

¹¹ Southern Baptist Convention, “On the Liberation of Iraq” (June 2003) [Southern Baptist Convention website]; available from <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1126>.

¹² For a discussion of hegemony informing this account, see Ernesto Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics,” in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), particularly pp. 44-52.

¹³ It would be virtually impossible to overstate the role of media in hegemonic constructions. The media, as is widely recognized, do not merely “represent” reality, but construct it in an important sense. It must be understood that such a statement has to do with media *per se*, and has little to do with debates in the U.S. concerning whether or not there is a so-called “liberal bias” in the media. Rather the issue has to do with the way in which information is presented to the public (invariably construed as “consumers” who need to be “entertained” by such presentations), thereby constructing the “reality” to which that public responds and in which it understands itself to be living. With regard to the present context, the point is that the “world” that is presented in the media is one in which nationalist evangelicals are not simply representative of their kind, but of “Christians,” even of “values,” as such. A recent study by the Washington-Based group Media Matters for America illustrates this point, showing that such nationalist evangelicals (not a term the study uses) are presented in the public media in a manner which is disproportionate to the presentation of more moderate or liberal religious figures, and which is out of proportion to their actual numerical representation in the U.S. population as a whole. (It might also be of interest to some that one of the representatives of such evangelicals who figures with some prominence in the graphs accompanying the study is Richard Land, President of the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission). This situation both reflects and maintains the hegemony of these groups, especially insofar as it occludes the inner heterogeneity that marks Christianity in the U.S. See Media Matters for America, “Left Behind: The Skewed Representation of Religion in Major News Media” (Washington, D.C.: Media Matters for America, 2007) [PDF file available online]; available from <http://mediamatters.org/LeftBehind>.

¹⁴ Taylor, “Spirit and Liberation,” 41.

¹⁵ Ibid, 40.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the kind of development in view here, see L. Michael White, *From Jesus to Christianity: How Four Generations of Visionaries & Storytellers Created the New Testament and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004).

¹⁷ Keller, "Love of Postcolonialism," 222.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 223.

²⁰ Ibid. This statement, of course, cannot encompass every movement which would have identified itself as "Christian." It refers, rather, to the dominant form of Christendom, the complex faction of Christianity that won the battle of normatively defining the tradition.

²¹ Ibid.

²² This paper is deeply informed by the perspective that Christianity is best understood as, playing on the phrasing of Mark Jordan, not a self-identical tradition, but as "complexes of communities communicating and fighting with one another." The comments are taken from the Roundtable discussion between participants in the "Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion" conference held at Syracuse University April 26-28, 2007.

²³ Taylor, "Spirit and Liberation," 47.

²⁴ Ibid, 49.

²⁵ Keller, "Love of Postcolonialism," 223. Keller is correct to note that "the postcolonial contribution properly comes from the peripheries, diasporas, and boundary zones of empire..." (223). The simple fact of the matter is that it is almost certain that no one who will ever read or hear this presentation will fall into this category; on the contrary, the presumed audience of this presentation consists of those who seek to contest empire from within. Keller's appeal to "defection" is fitting in this regard.

²⁶ It may be worth noting here a sharp distinction between this understanding of Baptist communities and that presented in the recently-debated "Baptist Manifesto." The authors of this work, while affirming a church that presses for "independence...from the idols of nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, economic systems, gender domination, or any other power that resists the Lordship of Jesus Christ" (3), nevertheless maintain that "only a church that is politically and culturally independent can convince its own and others of the gospel truth" (4). It seems that these two passages do not easily fit together: To achieve the vision of the first requires local churches which undertake their communal life against the horizon of a given cultural context, and which are significant only in relation to that context. In contrast, this latter phrase indicates an overly abstract notion of the church: Apart from the kind of horizon precluded in their statement, there could be no meaningful embodiment of a church. For the Manifesto itself, see "Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997), 303-310. The page numbers given in the references here refer to those a PDF version of the document. For a cogent critique of the kind of the kind of communitarianism represented in the Manifesto, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

What is envisioned in the present work is not simply a separate community unmarked by nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, economic systems (how could a church possibly be free of economic systems?), gender domination, etc., but a community constituted by active engagement in the contestation of such "idols." While it may well be the case that the framers of the "Manifesto" envision such active contestation, this does not come through in their discussion.

²⁷ William R. Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 46.

²⁸ The translation of the Greek term *basileia* as "empire," rather than the more common "kingdom," follows Stephen D. Moore, who argues that "*basileia* in Mark, and in other early Christian texts, is best rendered in English by the term 'empire' rather than by the more innocuous 'kingdom,' a term whose political edge has been all but rubbed smooth by centuries of theological usage." The de-familiarization brought about by the application of this term (empire) seems desirable, and so its use here departs from the wisdom of John Dominic Crossan, who argues that, despite problems with the English "kingdom," "it is so traditional that any alternative might be confusing." For Moore's remarks, see Stephen D. Moore, "'My Name is Legion, for We are Many': Representing Empire in Mark," in *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 37, n. 29. For Crossan's remarks, see John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 55.

²⁹ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 14.

³⁰ Moore, "Representing Empire in Mark," 38.

³¹ Herzog, 182. See also Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 103. Though most of the discussion that follows is taken from Herzog, many similar points could be elaborated in other authors such as Horsley, Moore, and Crossan.

³² One of the presuppositions informing this treatment is that the Bible is not marked by a deep univocity behind the diversity of its constituent textual traditions and histories, whether such a univocity be understood as a commonality of divine intending, of authorial intention, or what might be called a "narrative arc." There is, rather, a heterogeneous collection of texts, themselves irreducibly polyphonic and complex, which do not lend themselves to unifying presentations. The view that the Bible constitutes a sort of *grand récit*, a metanarrative outlining a single story unified by a single plot of "salvation

history” (or of doctrinal uniformity, in its more propositionalist forms) is the product of a particular intellectual and cultural history. As Catherine Keller rightly points out, the idea of the Bible as such a metanarrative “that originates as the Creation and ends in the Second Coming and New Creation emerges with, and only with, the baptism of Hellenistic ontotheology.” With the calling into question of that ontotheological heritage necessarily comes the calling into question of the Bible as “the Book,” in the sense of the term outlined and critiqued by Mark C. Taylor. For Keller’s discussion, See Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 81. For Taylor’s discussion, see Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 74-93. (The entire first half of this seminal work remains one of the best expositions of the challenge of “postmodern” thought [and particular Derridean poststructuralism] to historically dominant forms of Christian theology, and is recommended as useful background to the position advanced in this paper).

If the Bible is not a unified Book, but is instead polyphonic, complex, and often contradictory, then the image of Jesus developed from Biblical texts here cannot be understood as the recovery of an “authentic” Jesus of Nazareth, or as constituting a return to some originary biblical *arché* which provides the key to a theological Secret. On the contrary, this exposition of Jesus of Nazareth is a creative theological endeavor (which does not imply that there are no constraints on its development). Like every theological articulation, though perhaps more self-consciously than some, it involves a complex relation to the polyphony of voices represented in the biblical texts and their reception history. As such, the development of this theological proposal necessarily involves emphases and elevations of particular texts and traditions and the concomitant muting or suppressing of alternative or contradictory texts and traditions. In the present construction, the understanding of Jesus which is taken as axiomatic serves as a sort of “hermeneutic key” of reevaluating other biblical texts in the effort to contest the alignment of Christianity with empire and oppression, as outlined above. The logic involved here is nicely illustrated by Jacques Derrida’s discussions of the notion of “inheritance,” as well as in the statement by the “modernist” Baptist theologian Shailer Mathews, who writes of theologians who “see that to organize life in loyalty to the Christian movement leads the present like past to reexpress the inherited attitudes and convictions of the first Christian group in effective institutions and new doctrinal patterns.” For Derrida’s discussion, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 16ff. For Mathews, see Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 171.

In this view, the “Christian tradition” itself is viewed as irreducibly, internally, and constitutively heterogeneous and fissured, speaking always with multiple and often contradictory voices. An operative assumption here is, furthermore, that this heterogeneity does not represent a departure from an originary unity, but has marked the tradition from its inception. In fact, rather than speaking of “the Christian tradition,” one would be better served in speaking of diverse and often conflicting Christian traditions. For discussions of this point which inform the present paper, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths we Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), particularly Part Three; and White, particularly Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen.

³³ Of particular concern here is the likelihood that Jesus of Nazareth, in advocating an “empire of God,” does not effectively displace the logic of empire *per se*. This is outlined very effectively in Moore, who highlights the ambiguous interplay of notions of empire in the Gospel texts, even within Mark itself (which he, along with Herzog, Horsley, and Crossan, takes to be the most promising of the biblical Gospels for an anti-imperial critique). Moore poses the following question concerning the Gospel of Mark, which could be applied to the other canonical Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) as well: “In attributing absolute, unassailable authority to Jesus, is Mark merely mirroring Roman imperial ideology, deftly switching Jesus for Caesar...but thereby undercutting the Gospel’s anti-authoritarian thematics, and inaugurating an Empire of God that inevitably evinces many of the oppressive traits of the Roman Empire it displaces?” (37). Is Jesus simply swapping the Roman Empire for an “über-Roman Empire” (40)? Moore’s position, and that which informs this paper, is that a fuller and more complete analysis of the Gospels, and certainly of the New Testament in general, is that the *logic* of empire, while contested at points, is largely reenacted (this is a position which is recognized by Crossan, but largely underdeveloped in Herzog and Horsley). There is therefore a common New Testament ambiguity regarding Empire (the recognition of which Moore argues is a mark of postcolonial, as opposed to liberation, theological hermeneutics [31]). Moore also contrasts the textual elements that are oppositional in relation to empire with “the explicitly ‘quietistic’ attitude toward Roman rule evident in at least two other first-century Christian texts, namely, the letter to the Romans (cf. 13.1-7) and 1 Peter (cf. 2:13-17)” (35-36). The point of concern here is that it is possible, indeed likely, that the New Testament as a whole, including the canonical gospels, do not effectively outline an alternative to the logic of empire, but rather empire’s reversal. It is worth highlighting as well that the idea here is that the New Testament does not take the critique of empire as such seriously enough. References are taken from Moore, “Representing Empire in Mark.” The simple reversal of imperial roles, as opposed to the displacement of the logic of empire, is most evident in the book of Revelation, and is discussed in Stephen D. Moore, “‘The World Empire has Become the Empire of our Lord and his Messiah:’ Representing Empire in Revelation,” in *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006). For a similar analysis of the ambiguities of the relation between Jesus, empire, and violence in the New Testament, see John Dominic Crossan, *God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2007).

³⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 103.

³⁵ Ibid, 106. Horsley provides an effective summary of this “underside”: “Partly because they resisted the new imperial order, Galileans and Judeans suffered slaughter, enslavement, and destruction of their homes and villages....The escalating economic demands resulting from multiple layers of rulers in Palestine compounded the imperial impact on the social order. Gospel literature portrays a people that is heavily indebted and hungry, plagued by physical and social paralysis, and generally despairing about its circumstances.”

³⁶ Ibid, 107.

³⁷ Ibid, 106.

³⁸ Herzog, 70.

³⁹ Ibid, 113.

⁴⁰ Horsley, 85.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Herzog, 122.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 120-121.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 123.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The quotes here indicate, of course, that the division of the material from the spiritual is an anachronism that would certainly not have been applicable to the context under discussion. Maintaining an appreciation for this strengthens the material significance of the issues under discussion here.

⁴⁹ Herzog, 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 136.

⁵¹ Ibid, 137.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Herzog goes on to note that “it was no accident that one of the first acts of the First Jewish Revolt in 66 C.E. was the burning of the debt records in the archives in Jerusalem,” lending credence to his interpretation.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 113.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 120.

⁶¹ Ibid, 143. See also Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 98.

⁶² Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 86.

⁶³ All Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV.

⁶⁴ Herzog, 140.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 139.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 140.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 141.

⁶⁹ Herzog notes that “according to the Torah, any male with damaged testicles or penis, that is, a eunuch, was blemished and, therefore, banned from ‘the assembly of the Lord’ (Lev. 21:16-23; Deut. 23:1)” (140). Ezra and Nehemiah were therefore on solid legal footing in enforcing an “isolationist” program excluding such individuals following the return to the land. Isaiah’s express inclusion of eunuchs in the covenant community in his oracle of Isaiah 56:1-8 therefore constitutes a situation in which “God overturns a provision of the law in order to fulfill a promise” (141).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 92. See also Herzog, 141.

⁷² Herzog, 141. The quotation is taken from Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 300.

⁷³ Herzog, 137.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 141.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 142.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ It is worth also noting Horsley’s statement that “neither in this episode nor in Mark as a whole is there any suggestion of the replacement of ‘Judaism’ by ‘Christianity’” (Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 93). Such a misreading, besides being anachronistic, reductive, and potentially anti-Semitic, would simply serve to marginalize the actual context of Jesus’ actions,

robbing them of their political, economic, and material significance. Jesus goal was not to replace one “religion” with another, which is to say that his goals should be understood as primarily “spiritual,” insofar as this would differentiate them from “material” or “political” aims.

⁷⁸ Herzog, 138.

⁷⁹ The treatment of this text is taken from Herzog, 124ff. For discussion of the critical issues involved in discussing this passage, as well as his reasons for examining passages that, though not “historical” may still be taken to reflect concerns of the historical Jesus, see his discussion on pp. 123-124.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 126-127.

⁸¹ Ibid, 127.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 128.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 129. The quotation in the passage is taken from Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 211.

⁸⁹ Herzog, 129.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 131.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 192. Quoted in Herzog, 131.

⁹³ Herzog, 131.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ For further discussion of healing, particularly as it relates to power, honor, and the Sabbath, see his discussion on pp. 168-190. For a good example of how healing relates to both illness and disease, see Joel B. Green, “Restoring the Human Person: New Testament Voices for a Wholistic and Social Anthropology,” in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell et. al. (Berkeley: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2002).

⁹⁶ Herzog, 219. It is also worth noting his correct insistence that these elites were acting in line with their social position, and not as “Jews.”

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 241. Joel B. Green captures this as well, writing that “quite apart from the difficulties Jesus encountered among leading Jews, his ministry and message were on a collision course with Roman interests. Even if he was relatively unknown in the Roman world, he propagated a worldview that ran counter to official Roman ideology and encouraged others to do the same.” Joel B. Green, “Crucifixion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Brockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 92.

⁹⁹ Herzog, 241.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 240.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 242.

¹⁰² Ibid, 244-245.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 245.

¹⁰⁴ The notion of “event” here is a technical one, building on the notion as it is developed in the thought of Jacques Derrida, which builds upon the hermeneutical phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. He describes what he has in mind in the following terms: “The undergoing of the event, that which in the undergoing or in the ordeal *at once opens itself up to and resists experience*, is, it seems to me, a certain *unappropriability* of what comes or happens. The event is what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and suspend comprehension: the event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend. Better, the event is first of all *that* I do not comprehend” (emphasis original). The event is that which cannot be appropriated, though it demands appropriation. What Derrida has in mind here (and there are other Continental philosophers who develop similar notions) is a kind of unaccountable disruption that happens upon us, a disruption that for which the ordinary logic that guides life cannot render an accounting.

It is this notion of “event” that the image of resurrection is intended to evoke here. The more typical questions and arguments concerning, for example, whether or not the resurrection is a “literal” historical happening are left to others, as the answer to this question leaves this basic structure of the event unaffected. That is, not all historical happenings are events, nor is there any reason to suppose that events are limited to those things which could be called “historical.”

For the discussion used here, see Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 90

¹⁰⁵ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing who we Are* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 239.

¹⁰⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 6. The relation between the “economic Trinity” and the “immanent Trinity,” of course, has a colored history in the complex of Christian theological traditions. A number of modern Christian theologians have affirmed the basic identity of the two, but perhaps none have stated it more clearly or more famously than Karl Rahner (in the formulation referred to as “Rahner’s Rule”): “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.” Rahner goes so far as to state that this is the “basic thesis” of his treatment (21), and it is a guiding thesis in this work as well. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997), 22.

¹⁰⁷ Trinitarian theology is central to all of Fiddes’ theological thought. His fullest published treatment to date is Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*. For sake of ease, however, the bulk of the references in this work will be taken from Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2003) will also figure in this treatment.

¹⁰⁸ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 126.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 267.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

¹¹⁵ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 71. There are a number of reasons to recommend this perspective, or some variant of it, some of which will appear in the main text. It is worth noting here, however, that such a formulation allows for an understanding of God which builds from the resources of the Christian tradition in a manner that is consistent with common Continental critiques concerning ontotheological notions of God. These critiques have to do, in part, with the fact that such notions of God (as, in Derrida’s words, the “name of God” as “this One and Only God,” determined as “sovereign, and thus indivisible, omnipotence”) have often, in the history of the West generally and Christendom specifically, given license to authoritarian social and political structures, grounded as they are in ontotheological notions of “sovereignty.” Concerning this latter point, the entire focus of *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* is a sustained critique of political sovereignty as an ontotheological notion. The quotation of Derrida is taken from Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 157.

Also concerning this latter point, Derrida, in debate with Jean-Luc Marion, argues that even if it is not the case that authoritarian political structures necessarily follow from such ontotheological notions, it nevertheless remains the case that there is “the historic, essential, undeniable, and irreducible” possibility of such an identification, of which some account must be given. For this point, see Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 134, n. 9.

In addition to these political critiques (though closely related to them), this paper also presupposes many of the critiques of “subjectivity,” many of which are also assumed by Fiddes. In this regard, he writes that “this vision of the Trinity enables resistance to the authority of the absolute individual, as well as ways in which it might be misused to sanction it.” Fiddes’ proposal thus problematizes any notion of the divine as either a community of three distinct subjects or one über-Subject. Fiddes’ formulation also shares many commonalities with the insights of poststructuralist thought (according to which identity *per se* is an effect of difference and relation, rather than relation being an accidental effect of identity), though it was initially developed more out of process thought than poststructuralism. For Fiddes’ quote see *Participating in God*, 75. For now-classic formulations of Derrida’s views, see Jacques Derrida, “Differánce,” in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, in *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

¹¹⁶ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 268.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 71.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹²² *Ibid.* Fiddes makes extensive use of the image of the dance in *Participating in God*, to the point of choosing an image of Henri Matisse’s 1909 painting “The Dance” for the cover of the version of the book distributed in the UK. He makes a play on words between *perichoresis* and *perichoreuo* (to dance) (72). In keeping with his emphasis on relations as opposed to subjects/essences/substances, he also insists that “the image of the divine dance is not so much about dancers as about the patterns of the dance itself, an interweaving of ecstatic movements” (72).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹²⁴ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 269.

¹²⁵ Ibid. It seems necessary at this point to say a word about the androcentric language that Fiddes, perhaps despite his best instincts, continues to privilege. He states that “in appropriate circumstances it will be right to use feminine images for the flow of relationships in which we are engaged...” (69). But, despite this caveat, one is still left with the impression that masculine language concerning the divine relations has a normative status. This insistence is very clear throughout *Participating*, where Fiddes explicitly asserts the normative status of masculine language, writing, for example, that “the language of ‘Father, Son and Spirit’ is central and indispensable, but not exclusive or exhaustive...” (89). This insistence remains bothersome, especially given Fiddes’ equally widespread and insistent affirmation of the metaphorical nature of language about God (cf. *Participating in God*, 40). As will become clearer in what follows, Fiddes’ own insistence on the role of the Holy Spirit in opening the trinitarian relations should contest this androcentric focus more than Fiddes seemingly allows. The Continental philosopher Richard Kearney provides a useful corrective insight with regard to the notion of the Trinity. Playing with the notion of *perichoresis*, Kearney writes of “three persons dancing around (*peri*) a fourth dimension, an empty space (*chora*)—that sacred milieu a mutual withdrawal, letting be, love. Three persons who would collapse into indifference and indifferentiation were it not for that free feminine spacing opening up between them: an Open that holds them at once together and apart. For *chora* has always been a she. The matrix of all things.” See Richard Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 10.

¹²⁶ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 269.

¹²⁷ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 75.

¹²⁸ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 73.

¹²⁹ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 272.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ It is worth noting what is, it seems, a significant point of disagreement between the theological position that is being advanced here and Fiddes’ own. Fiddes is clear at several points that the life of Jesus of Nazareth constitutes the only perfect coincidence of human life and the movements of the divine life. In addition, he hints (though this is certainly not clear) that such participation in the divine life is only rendered possible by the participation of Jesus of Nazareth, writing, for example, that “we are able to make these [father-to-son and son-to-father movements of speech, empathy, and action] our own...through the complete identity of the eternal movement of sonship with human sonship in the person of Jesus Christ (‘incarnation’), so that movements of human-divine communion are already present in God on which we can lean” (269). A possible implication here is that, without this perfect participation on the part of Jesus of Nazareth no human participation in God would be possible. While this paper takes Jesus of Nazareth’s participation in the immanent movements of the divine life as the paradigmatic “hermeneutical key” to Christian life, it is left as an open question as to whether or not other participations of creation in the life of the divine have taken place. What Jesus of Nazareth shows, then, is the way in which participation in the divine life is constituted as the superlative model for Christians.

¹³² Fiddes, *Participating*, 72.

¹³³ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 271.

¹³⁴ Cf. p. 14.

¹³⁵ Fiddes, *Promised End*, 270.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ This point allows for the issue of feminine language about God to be revisited. If the intra-trinitarian relations are not fixed and static, it follows that the “names” used for them cannot be static, either. That is, if there is an irreducibly dynamic, open aspect to the divine relations, according to which it is not possible to determine beforehand exactly what shape they will take, neither is there any way to determine once and for all what kind of language will be most appropriate for speaking about them. Thus, it is not possible to affirm that masculine images, such as those of “father” and “son,” will necessarily maintain any kind of normative status.

¹³⁸ A simple illustration of this is ready to hand with the extension of Jesus’ praxis from an application almost solely in regard Israel to include gentiles, to the point that Paul affirmed the equality of Jew and Gentile before God; this extension can be thought of as the effect of the Spirit “blowing where it will” (Jn. 3:8), extending the kinds of human relations that constitute participation in the life of God. To affirm the equality of Jew and Gentile, an extension of Jesus’ own praxis, constitutes a participation in the divine life, and, as such, represents a novel extension of the divine relations. Similar considerations can be given for the historical expansion of this praxis to involve the relations of “male to female” and “slave to free” (Gal. 3:28). Likewise, already in Acts, Jesus’ message is being commended to “Jerusalem, in all Judea, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), whereas Jesus’ own ministry seems to have made evident little concern outside of the people of Israel and their renewal. Finally, as a last example (though they could certainly be multiplied further), Simon Peter’s recognition of the possibility of Gentile inclusion into the new community is paradigmatic (Acts 10).

¹³⁹ Cf. p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition (London: Verso, 2001), particularly chapters three and four.

¹⁴¹ Of course, the openness of the social field is also the condition of possibility for the arising of new and different authoritarian and non-egalitarian social relations. The openness of the social is thus both promise and threat.

¹⁴² A simple example of this kind of conflict is apparent in certain theologically conservative Christian circles in which traditional understandings of the roles of men and women in church, as taken primarily from the deuter-Pauline literature, come into conflict with contemporary discourses affirmed the functional egalitarianism of men and women in all aspects of social life. The example is a vivid one, given that this conflict is far from settled in such contexts.

¹⁴³ Laclau and Mouffe, 155

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 156.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ For example, the general principle of political equality extends, in Marxist thought, to economic equality and, in post-Marxist and other kinds of theory, to gender equality, to sexual equality, etc.

¹⁴⁷ This is technically something of a misstatement. From the poststructuralist perspective of Laclau and Mouffe, such groups do not simply pre-exist in the social field, awaiting their recognition. Rather, increasing pluralities of oppressed identities come into being as the social field is disrupted. Nevertheless, the formulation given here is sufficient for present purposes.

¹⁴⁸ The identity of the church, in such a view, would be “ecstatic,” an *ek-stasis*, marked by its opening out to the oppressed other. In a sense, then, the identity of the church is precisely its non-identity. For an excellent short treatment of what is in view here, see John D. Caputo, “A Commentary: Deconstruction in a Nutshell,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 106-124.

¹⁴⁹ It is also worth noting that there is no reason to suppose that such participation is limited to what is commonly considered the church, nor is there any reason to think that such participation must be conscious or intentional. If participation in such emancipatory praxis is constitutive of the church, then “churches” that do not participate in such praxis or that actively oppose such praxis, don’t qualify as part of the ecstatic community of God. Likewise, those individuals or communities who are active in such praxis, whether or not such praxis is consciously undertaken in imitation or extension of that of Jesus or Nazareth, participate in the trinitarian life of God. This is an especially important point, given that, in the context of the United States, there are no doubt millions of such participants who have chosen not to be involved in the life of Christian communities precisely *because* such communities are either not involved in such praxis or because they actively oppose it. The position here is therefore markedly different from, for example, that espoused by “Radical Orthodox” thinkers such as John Milbank, insofar as the typical Radical Orthodox position is that *only* the Christian church (almost invariably understood in an Anglo-Catholic manner) is capable of meaningful social action. For perhaps the most developed elaboration of this position, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

¹⁵⁰ It should be clear by this point that the category of “differentiated liberating struggle” includes concerns which exceed the discourse of “postcolonialism.” Such expansion would include feminism, ecological movements, immigration rights movements, etc, and would certainly have application in contexts other than within the seat of neocolonial power.

¹⁵¹ Cf. p. 2.

¹⁵² Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁵³ Walter Shurden, for example, identifies a common religious “mood” (freedom) that unites the Baptist distinctives he identifies. Paul Fiddes sees the uniqueness of Baptist identity as the manner in which Baptists hold together various commitments that are not in themselves unique to Baptists. In both cases, then, Baptist identity is a manner of what is referred to here as “style.” See Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1993), 1-2; Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 12.

¹⁵⁴ Walter Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 25:4 (Winter 1998), 321-340; 12. The version utilized here is the online version, available from <http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/shurden/Baptist%20Manifesto.htm>; the page numbers cited correspond to the electronic document.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Charles W. Deweese. “Freedom: The Key to the Baptist Genius” (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2006), 8.

¹⁵⁷ Those familiar with the debate which has taken place in some circles concerning the “Baptist Manifesto” will no doubt hear echoes of that controversy here. Concerning the notion of freedom, this paper must again take a critical position vis-à-vis the Manifesto, though perhaps not for the reason its framers might suppose. It seems that, concerning the relation of individual and church community, the framers of the Manifesto operate within the confines of a false dichotomy, assuming either an Enlightenment liberal individualism or a form of communitarianism, and clearly opting for the latter. The concern here is that, as it is framed, the Manifesto, in rightly contesting such individualism, does away with dissenting agency, reducing the individual to the community.

Deweese is rightly critical of the effect of Baptist fundamentalism on the principle of freedom; but it seems that communitarianism, at least as outlined in the Manifesto, is equally problematic (indeed, Gianni Vattimo see both

contemporary religious fundamentalism and communitarianism as responses to the same provocation, namely the “dissolution of metaphysics” and its assurances). Both, it seems, reduce the disruptive freedom affirmed by Baptists in principle to the dictates of a community that claims to speak for God. What needs to be done is not to opt for one side or the other of this dichotomy, but to disrupt the dichotomy altogether. Though impossible to develop here, it seems that poststructuralist theory (e.g., in the thought of Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe) provides the material for thinking beyond this dualism, affirming that individuals are “always already” constituted by their location within a complex interweaving of social, cultural, political, religious, etc. contexts and discourses, but that, at the same time, individuals nevertheless remain “singularities” with the ability to disrupt, contest, and otherwise affect those constituting complexes. While caricatures of such theoretical perspectives often present it as a kind of “subjectivism,” no consistent poststructuralist theory can be “subjectivistic” precisely because such theory is critical of the Enlightenment notion of the “subject.” For Vattimo, see Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002), 19.

¹⁵⁸ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 40-45.

¹⁵⁹ The argument here, in more technical terms, is that such an understanding of Baptist ecclesiology is “auto-deconstructive.” That is to say, Baptist ecclesiology affirms its own mutable status, and is open to its own disruption in the name of a fuller embodiment of its principles. Derrida’s most clearly developed notion of the “auto-deconstructible” is given in relation to his notion of “democracy,” a political system that he holds to be auto-deconstructible. Derrida takes “democracy” to be “the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of auto-immunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name.” See Derrida, *Rogues*, 86-87.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. note 103.

¹⁶¹ The structure of call/response is common among contemporary Continental philosophers, whether they be on the radical side (e.g., Derrida, Caputo), the more traditional/theological side (e.g., Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Luis Chrétien), or somewhere in between (e.g. Richard Kearney).

¹⁶² An explicit presupposition here is that a “call” that cannot be resisted or spurned is not a proper “call,” but rather a compulsion. Response to the call, therefore, is taken to be “free” in the sense that it is possible to refuse to accede to it. The sentiment of E.Y. Mullins is essentially correct at this point: “To be authentic and responsible, faith must be free. Obedience to God must be voluntary, or it is not obedience.” See E.Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Louisville, KY: Baptist World Publishing Co., Inc., 1912), 7.

¹⁶³ Bill J. Leonard, “An Introduction to Baptist Principles” (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Center, 2005), 17.

¹⁶⁴ Leonard, “Introduction,” 17.

¹⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars*, ed. Paul Patton and Terry Smith (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001), 77.

¹⁶⁶ The notion of Jesus’ coming which is operative here might be thought of as a “permanent eschatology that continually disturbs and disrupts” (Herzog, 65). Jesus comes wherever liberative praxis opposes oppression. It is what Richard Kearney calls a “micro-eschatology” or “eschatology of the everyday” (Kearney, “Epiphanies,” 11). It is an eschatology that is brought about with the realization that “God is manifest in the least ones calling for a cup of cold water, asking to be fed, clothed, cared for, heard, loved” (Kearney, “Epiphanies,” 11). Kearney pushes this notion far, in a manner that captures what is intended here. In a lecture based on the text cited here, Kearney states that the cry in the street, the least one asking for water, etc. is “not the trace of God, but the flesh of God. [God] is the cry in the street; [God] is not *like* it.” With the advent of differentiated liberating struggle comes the advent of God, the “coming” of Jesus. Anywhere oppression is disrupted is the locus of an eschatological arrival of the movement of God. See Richard Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” lecture presented at Syracuse University on October 25, 2006.

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