

Gardner-Webb University

Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University

Gardner-Webb University Faculty Sabbatical
Presentations

Faculty Scholarship

9-2021

Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church: Partners in the Pilgrimage to Unity

Steven R. Harmon

Gardner-Webb University, sharmon@gardner-webb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/sabbatical-presentations>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Citation Information

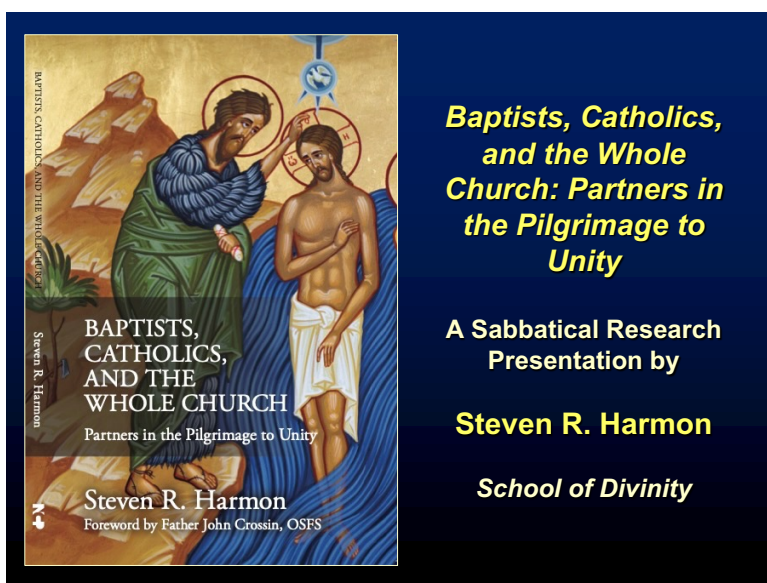
Harmon, Steven R., "Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church: Partners in the Pilgrimage to Unity" (2021). *Gardner-Webb University Faculty Sabbatical Presentations*. 1.
<https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/sabbatical-presentations/1>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gardner-Webb University Faculty Sabbatical Presentations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@gardner-webb.edu.

Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church: Partners in the Pilgrimage to Unity

**A Sabbatical Research Presentation by
Steven R. Harmon, Professor of Historical Theology, School of Divinity**

August 10, 2021



In my application for a sabbatical leave during the 2020-2021 academic year, submitted in October 2019, I set forth the following goals:

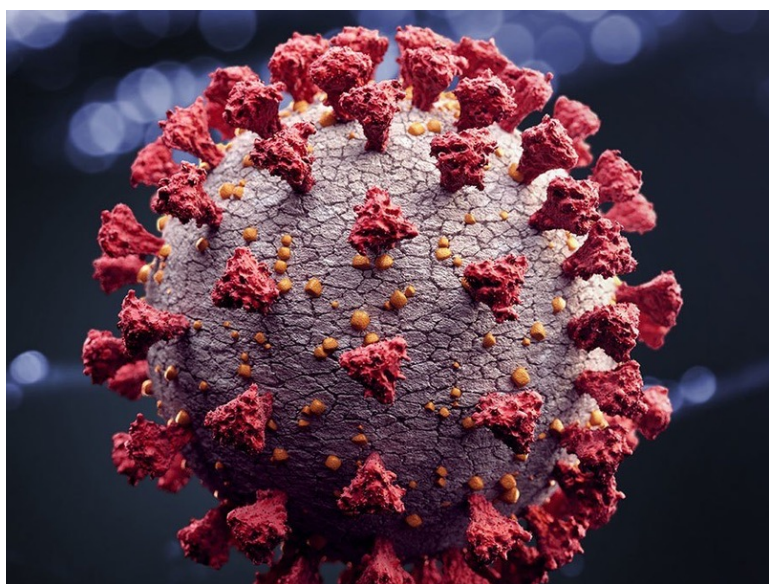
1. Conduct research for the remaining chapters of my proposed monograph *Baptist Ecumenical Trailblazers: Free Church Contributions to Christian Unity*, especially the chapters on pioneering 20th-century British Baptist ecumenists J. H. Shakespeare and Ernest Payne, with some of the research on those chapters conducted during a trip to the Angus Library at Regent's Park College of the University of Oxford.

2. Write and submit a complete book

proposal for *Baptist Ecumenical Trailblazers: Free Church Contributions to Christian Unity*, including polished sample chapters.

3. Re-write, edit, and write new material for *Real Baptists Do This: Free Church Practices of Catholic Faith* (a general readership book drawing on my previous public scholarship on Baptist identity published in venues such as *Baptist News Global* and *Baptists Today*) and submit a finished manuscript for this book.

However . . .



I proposed these goals prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the archival work in the U.K. necessary for further progress on *Baptist Ecumenical Trailblazers* book impossible for Fall 2020. I had planned a research trip to the U.K. for September 2020, with guest lectures at the beginning of my time there scheduled at Scottish Baptist College in Glasgow and Bristol Baptist College and a lecture at the International Baptist Seminary Centre in Amsterdam, The Netherlands following my period of research in Oxford before returning home. As it became clear early in the summer that this trip would not be possible, I began to alter my plans for the sabbatical leave.

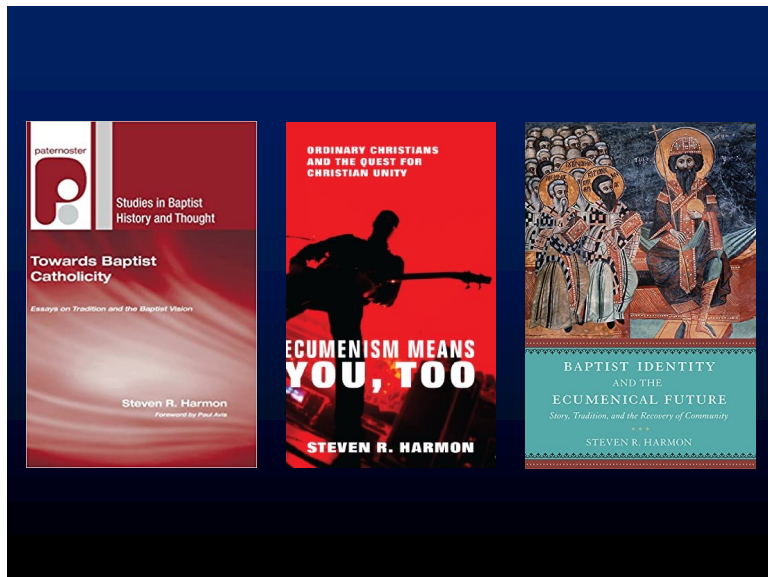
Since I was not able to conduct research for the remaining chapters of *Baptist Ecumenical Trailblazers* at the Angus Library at Regent's Park College of the University of Oxford during Fall 2020 and would likely not be able to do so for the foreseeable near future, I enlisted a British Baptist theologian-pastor, Andy Goodliff (Ph.D., University of St. Andrews) as co-author of the book. Goodliff, who has already published peer-refereed articles on some of the British Baptist ecumenists to whom chapters will be devoted, also

Harmon Sabbatical Research Presentation, p. 2

has local access to the archival materials needed for moving forward with this book project. Goodliff will write the chapters on the British Baptist figures highlighted in the book except for Paul Fiddes, about whose ecumenical work I had already drafted a chapter published in penultimate form as a journal article; I will contribute six chapters, he will contribute four, and we will co-author the introduction and conclusion.



In place of work on the *Baptist Ecumenical Trailblazers* book as the primary project for the sabbatical leave, I moved up to Fall 2020 work on a book project that I had envisioned for some point in the future after finishing other current book projects. I had planned a future book rooted in my involvement in the international Baptist-Catholic ecumenical dialogue during Phase II of the dialogue, 2006-2010 and Phase III for which I serve as Co-Secretary for the joint commission to the dialogue, 2017-present.



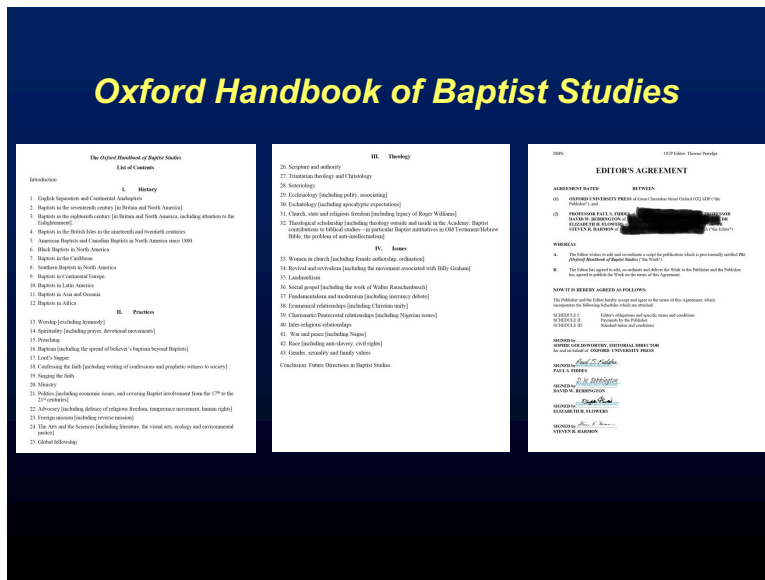
I had devoted previous books to what the Baptist tradition could gain from embracing the historic tradition of the larger church as its own (*Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Paternoster 2006), an introduction to the ecumenical movement (*Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity*, Cascade Books 2010), and how the Baptist tradition and the ecumenical movement would be mutually enriched by Baptist ecumenical engagement (*Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community*, Baylor University Press 2016), but I had not yet developed my more specific ongoing work in Baptist-Catholic ecumenical dialogue into a

book-length project. The limitations of the kind of research that could be done during the pandemic, while resulting in the deferral of my work on the *Baptist Ecumenical Trailblazers* book, did make my Fall 2020 sabbatical leave an ideal time for consolidating my previous and current work on Baptist-Catholic ecumenical encounter and shaping it into my next single-author book project, which I will introduce more fully after summarizing some other re-arranged dimensions of my plans for sabbatical research.

I also deferred resuming work on my proposed book *Real Baptists Do This: Free Church Practices of Catholic Faith* (a general readership book drawing on my previous public scholarship on Baptist identity published in venues such as *Baptist News Global* and *Baptists Today*), which I had planned earlier to be a secondary sabbatical leave book project, in light of two additional multi-author book projects on which I worked during the sabbatical leave and in light of the rapidly evolving national and global context—politically and

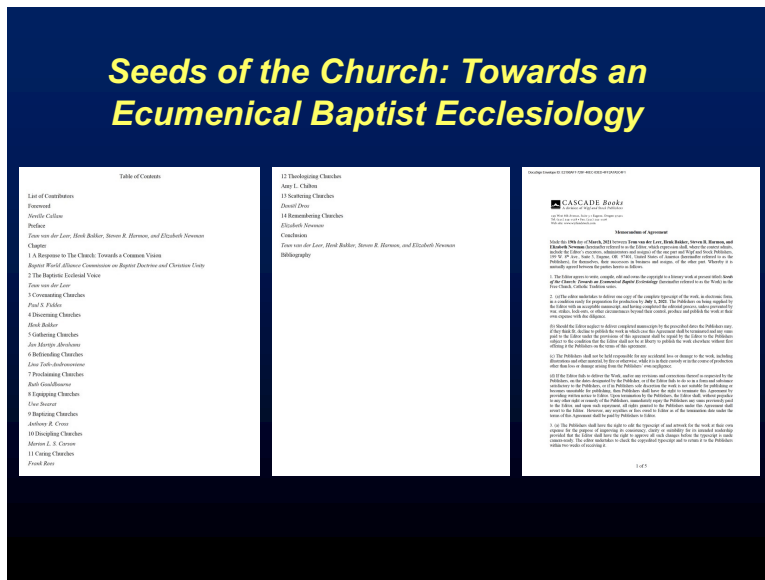
Harmon Sabbatical Research Presentation, p. 3

in relation to the ongoing pandemic—in which this project would relate Baptist existence to a particular time and place.



During my sabbatical leave I worked as one of four co-editors on a proposal to Oxford University Press for an *Oxford Handbook of Baptist Studies*. Paul S. Fiddes (University of Oxford), David Bebbington (University of Stirling, U.K.), Elizabeth Flowers (Baylor University), and I collaborated via e-mail and Zoom conferences on drafting a proposal and identifying prospective authors and at least two alternate authors for each of the envisioned 43 chapters of the book. We received an offer of a contract from Oxford University Press for the publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Baptist Studies* and began the process of securing commitments from invited contributors, with two remaining commitments to secure as of the

preparation of this presentation. We will continue work on the *Oxford Handbook of Baptist Studies* from 2021 through its projected late 2024 publication.



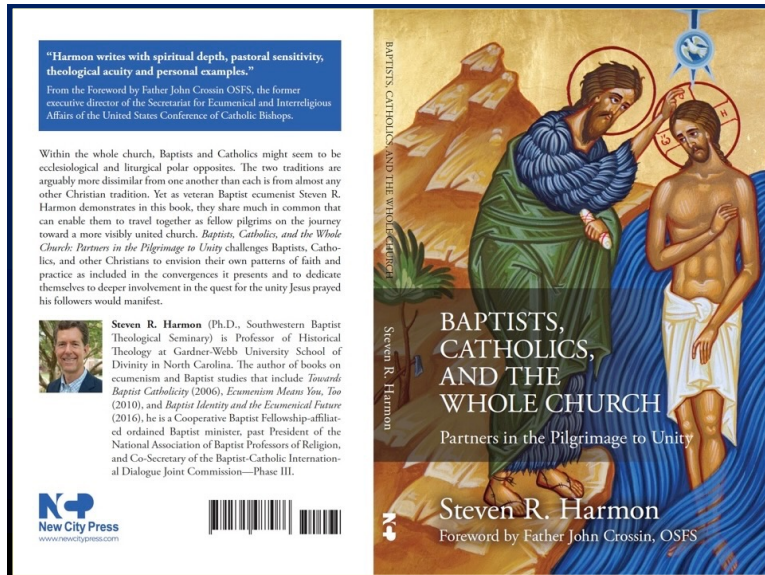
During Fall 2020 I also worked as one of four co-editors of a book with working title (and now final title) *Seeds of the Church: Towards an Ecumenical Baptist Ecclesiology*, rooted in the Baptist World Alliance response to the World Council of Churches convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (a response that I drafted in 2019 on behalf of the BWA Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Christian Unity). Along with co-editors Teun van der Leer (Baptist Seminary of the Netherlands), Hank Bakker (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), and Elizabeth Newman (formerly of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond faculty, now visiting professor at Duke Divinity School and Chair of the BWA Commission on Baptist

Doctrine and Christian Unity), I worked on finalizing the manuscript for submission along with our proposal, and in March we received an offer of a contract from Cascade Books for publication in its Free Church, Catholic Tradition series edited by Barry Harvey (Baylor University) and Jordan Rowan Fannin (Berry College). We are now in the final stages of copyediting the book for release sometime in 2022.

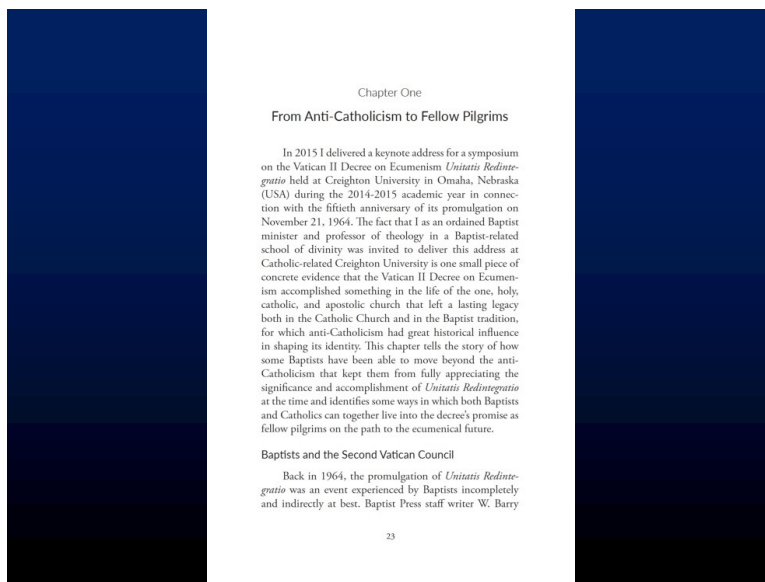
Back to the primary project on which I worked during my research leave. In September I submitted to New City Press (a publisher associated with the Focolare Catholic lay ecumenical movement that has published *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*) a proposal for a book with working title *Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church: Reflections on the Pilgrimage to Unity*. In early October I received an expression of interest from the publisher in receiving the full manuscript, which I completed in early

Harmon Sabbatical Research Presentation, p. 4

December. Soon thereafter I received an official contract for the book, which will be released in September 2021 under the title *Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church: Partners in the Pilgrimage to Unity*.



Within the whole church, Baptists and Catholics might seem to be ecclesiological and liturgical polar opposites. The two traditions are arguably more dissimilar from one another than each is from almost any other Christian tradition. Yet they share much in common that can enable them to travel together as fellow pilgrims on the journey toward a more visibly united church. *Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church* challenges Baptists, Catholics, and other Christians to envision their own patterns of faith and practice as included in the convergences it presents and to dedicate themselves to deeper involvement in the quest for the unity Jesus prayed his followers would manifest.



After an introduction explaining the rationale, origins, and thematic arc of the book, Chapter 1, “From Anti-Catholicism to Fellow Pilgrims,” tells the story of how many Baptists have moved beyond a tradition often marked by anti-Catholicism and anti-ecumenism to participate in the ecumenical revolution launched by the Second Vatican Council and in particular its Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, even entering into formal ecumenical dialogues with the Catholic Church that were made possible by the openings created by that Decree. It also envisions additional ways in which Baptists might live into the vision of this Decree by joining Catholics as fellow pilgrims on the road that leads to the ecumenical future of one

church under the rule of Christ.

Harmon Sabbatical Research Presentation, p. 5

Chapter Two

What Do Baptists and Catholics Have in Common?

The title of this chapter may seem like the set-up for a joke of some sort—or at least for a very brief response. Whether we are talking about how we worship (liturgy), or what we believe (theology), or how the church is structured (ecclesiology), it would seem to many that Baptists and Catholics are at opposite ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum. But as we have come to know each other better over the past five decades of various forms of formal Baptist-Catholic dialogue introduced briefly in the previous chapter, we have realized that we have much more in common than our polar-opposite stereotypes might suggest. As the previous chapter detailed, this realization was made possible by the ecumenical commitments made by the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council, in particular in its Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*. In that decree the Catholic Church committed itself to participation in the modern ecumenical movement. It recognized the presence of Christ, the work of the Spirit, the life of grace, and the communion of salvation among the individual, communities, and churches that are not currently in full communion with the Catholic Church. It recognized us as separated brothers and sisters, who though separated do have a certain though imperfect communion with the Catholic Church. Thus, it was the Catholic Church that graciously initiated new possibilities for reconciled eccl-

46

Chapter Three

How Baptists Receive Gifts of Catholic (and catholic) Christianity

One might well expect a chapter on this topic to be painfully brief: Baptists have a reputation as the “problem children” of the modern ecumenical movement, and the stereotype is not without foundation. Baptists have been quick to declare other traditions to be false churches. John Smyth, co-founder of the earliest Baptist congregation in Amsterdam in 1609, not only rejected his baptism in the Church of England as a false baptism; Smyth concluded that no communion in Amsterdam was qualified as a true church to administer a true baptism—not even the believer-baptizing Mennonites with whom his group of English Separatist exiles had connections—so he baptized himself before baptizing the other members of his community.¹⁷ Smyth soon regretted this action, for he decided that the Mennonites were a true church after all and sought to lead his congregation to be received into the Mennonite fellowship. Yet Smyth’s se-baptism (the technical term for baptizing oneself) foreshadowed the refusal of many recent Baptists to embrace the biblical and theological rationale for mutual recognition of baptism commended by *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*.¹⁸ Some Baptists have received *BEM* gladly. The Myanmar Baptist Convention, for example, publicly affirmed *BEM*’s call to refrain from re-baptizing those previously baptized as infants and commended the document to the Convention’s churches as a

69

The book then turns to the results of two distinct but complementary forms of Baptist-Catholic ecumenical encounter: official bilateral dialogues between representatives of the two traditions and the less formal—but arguably much more influential—ecumenical paradigm of “receptive ecumenism” by which churches of one tradition may identify in other traditions the ecclesial gifts distinctively preserved by them that can help the receiving tradition form communities of more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Chapter 2, “What Baptists and Catholics Have in Common,” summarizes the convergences between Baptists and Catholic identified during Phase II of the international ecumenical dialogue between the Baptist World

Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (2006-2010). Chapter 3, “How Baptists Receive Gifts of Catholic (and catholic) Christianity,” identifies several ways in which Baptist churches and their members have been receiving into their patterns of Baptist faith and practice the gifts that have been preserved and stewarded beyond the Baptist tradition, in Catholicism and in lower-case “c” catholic Christianity.

Chapter Four

Ecumenical Healing of Ecclesial Memories

The previous two phases of international Baptist-Catholic dialogue have touched upon memories of wounds suffered by Baptists and Catholics in relation to one another. The report from Phase I, *Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World*, notes this among the “challenges to common witness”:

In certain traditionally Roman Catholic countries civil constitutions and laws enacted prior to the Second Vatican Council have not been changed to reflect the teaching of the Council. In some settings with a dominant Baptist majority the traditional Baptist stress on separation of church and state as a means to assure religious freedom has been weakened. Both groups need to exercise greater vigilance to ensure respect for religious liberty (§ 43).¹⁹

The implication is that in contexts in which one communion has existed as a religious minority where the other communion is politically or culturally established—in Catholic-dominated Latin American countries or in the Baptist-dominated American South, for example—members of each communion have suffered some infringement of religious liberty, though this recognition is not expressed in terms of an explicit confession of wrongdoing or a call to repentance. The report from Phase II, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, however, directly calls for repentance and concrete actions that embody repentance in two paragraphs

86

Chapter 4, “Ecumenical Healing of Ecclesial Memories,” explores ecumenical dialogues between the Mennonite World Conference and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation, respectively, that gave attention to the healing of memories related to the persecution of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists by Catholics and Lutherans as a precondition for further ecumenical convergence today. The chapter looks to this earlier work on the healing of memories in dialogues with a communion similar in many ways to the Baptist tradition as precedents for the ecumenical healing that Baptists and Catholics need to experience in their mutual relations en route to offering to the

world a common witness to Jesus Christ.

Chapter Five

The Cruciformity of Communion

Since 1996, a small group of Baptist theologians in the United States from the membership of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion known as its "Region-at-Large" has been meeting jointly with the annual convention of the College Theology Society, an organization of predominantly Catholic college and university professors of theological and religious studies.¹⁵ During each year's meeting we share in two common worship services: a Friday evening prayer service jointly led by Baptist and Catholic participants, and a Saturday evening Catholic Mass celebrated by a local priest. Because as Baptists we are not in communion with the bishop of Rome and because we have what Catholicism regards as an insufficiently orthodox understanding of what happens in the Eucharist, the Baptist theologians are not permitted to receive the Eucharist during the Mass. Instead we proceed to the altar with arms crossed in front of our chests to indicate that we wish to receive a blessing from the priest at the altar in place of bread and wine. Conversely, if our Catholic colleagues were to attend a Baptist worship service that celebrated the Lord's Supper, Catholic canon law would not permit them to receive communion with us, for in Catholic understanding our celebrations of the Supper are not truly the Eucharist. All of us gathered for worship at these meetings, Catholics as well as Baptists, grieve the divisions manifested publicly in our separation

Chapter Six

Unity as Christ's Victory and Our Task

Each year from January 18 through 25, many Christians throughout the whole church participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This observance began in 1908 outside the Catholic Church as the initiative of two American Episcopalians, Fr. Paul Wattson and Sr. Lurana White, who were co-founders of the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement. This was initially an Episcopalian religious order that took on the pursuit of Christian unity as its vocation and sought especially the reunion of Anglican and Catholic Christianity. Eventually Wattson, White, and their order were received into the Catholic Church, and in 1916 Pope Benedict XV granted the observance official Catholic recognition. Today it is sponsored by the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order and the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and now many Baptists join Catholics and others in the whole church in observing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.¹⁷

In connection with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2012, I was invited by the Kentucky Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Relations Committee of Eastern Area Community Ministries, an ecumenical ministry partnership of churches in East Louisville, Kentucky, to lead a workshop on grassroots ecumenical engagement based on my book *Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity*¹⁸ and to deliver

The final two main chapters of the book are homiletical applications of the perspective on Baptists, Catholics, and the whole church developed in the preceding chapters. Chapter 5, "The Cruciformity of Communion," portrays the pilgrimage to an ecumenical future of full communion, at the Eucharistic table and in other dimensions of our currently divided ecclesial existence, as one that requires the fellow travelers to take up their crosses and follow Jesus into forms of conflict within and between churches that the journey will sometimes occasion. Chapter 6, "Unity as Christ's Victory and Our Task," concludes the book with a challenge to readers to join Baptists, Catholics, and the whole church as fellow pilgrims in the quest for the unity that Christ has already brought into being and that Christ leaves to his body the church as its ongoing task.

Appendix One

Envisioning the Whole Church

In 2013, the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order—on which both Baptist and Catholic representatives serve—issued *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*, which joined the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* document the WCC issued in 1982 as one of only two documents to be designated as a "convergence text" among the approximately 300 documents produced by the WCC Faith and Order Commission across its history. The 186 responses to *BEM* from member communions of the WCC had surfaced some ecclesiological themes that needed further study: (1) the role the church plays in God's salvific goals; (2) the implications for ecclesiology of the concept of Trinitarian *koïnōnia*; (3) the manner in which the church is created by the word of God; (4) the nature of the church as a sacrament by which the world comes to experience God's love; (5) the church's identity as a pilgrim community; and (6) the church as prophetic sign and servant of the coming reign of God.

A new project to address these broader issues of ecclesial vision evolved in several stages, beginning with a draft text titled *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. As with *BEM*, again the churches offered responses to this draft document that were taken into account in the next phase of the Commission's work. At the 2006 WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the Commission presented a new draft, *The Nature*

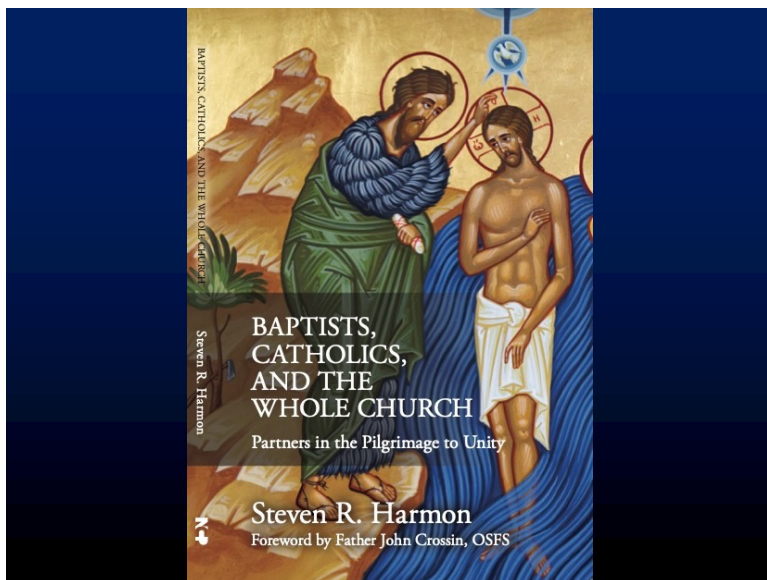
Appendix Two

Moral Discernment with the Whole Church

As Baptists, Catholics, and the whole church have continued to work on the matters of faith and order that continue to divide the churches, it has become increasingly clear that many of these matters are now related to the differing perspectives on ethical issues formed by the churches on the basis of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. These divisions related to ethics have been within particular Christian communions as well as between them. The World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order has been involved in an ongoing study project on Moral Discernment in the Churches to address the roots of these divisions and envision ways of overcoming them. An early stage of that project involved commissioning case studies from different Christian traditions that would illustrate how each approaches the task of moral discernment. I participated in a meeting of the WCC Plenary Commission on Faith and Order that met in Crete in October 2009 as a representative of the Baptist World Alliance and offered responses to these case studies in smaller working groups. (My own working group included Catholic and Orthodox theologians as well as representatives from various Protestant traditions.) Drawing on the Plenary Commission's discussion of the case studies and further work by a standing Moral Discernment Working Group, in 2013 the WCC issued *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*. When the Moral Discernment Working Group held

The book also includes two appendices that offer Baptist perspectives on ecumenical engagement with the whole church that includes Baptists and Catholics but that envision somewhat different readerships than the book's main chapters. Appendix 1, "Envisioning the Whole Church," offers a Baptist response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)* issued by the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order in 2013 as the WCC's second-ever "convergence text," a designation given previously to the landmark multilateral ecumenical breakthrough *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982). (This is the response that I drafted on behalf of the Baptist World Alliance that I mentioned in connection

with the *Seeds of the Church* book I co-edited with Teun van der Leer, Henk Bakker, and Elizabeth Newman.) Appendix 2, "Moral Discernment with the Whole Church," originated in an invitation from Neville Callam, former General Secretary of the BWA, to present a paper outlining a Baptist perspective on ecclesial moral discernment on behalf of the BWA to the Moral Discernment Working Group of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order in Erfurt, Germany, in July 2016. Appendix 2 is an adaptation of that presentation and addresses the ethical issues that on the one hand appear to have occasioned further divisions in the church but on the other hand call for each of the churches to draw on the resources of the whole church in their work of moral discernment.



I hope this presentation has interested you in reading *Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church*. If so, look for ordering information from New City Press and Amazon coming soon in advance of a late September release.

While I am disappointed that I was not able to travel to the U.K. for archival work in support of one of my book projects during Fall 2020, I believe that it has been a most productive sabbatical leave semester nonetheless. I am grateful to the trustees of Gardner-Webb University for approval of this sabbatical leave and their support of published faculty scholarship as essential to the mission of the University through our program of sabbatical

leaves, and to President William Downs, Provost Ben Leslie, my Dean Robert Canoy, and my Associate Dean Jim McConnell for their personal support for my sabbatical leave.