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FAITH

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Issue 7 (2022): Special Edition on James McClendon

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Guest Editorial: A Dissenting Theology from an Overlooked Baptist (or is that baptist?)

Ashley Lovett

The global COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions forced many of us to adopt new patterns for living and working. While it was unquestionably a moment of great tragedy, marked by significant loss, not least in the loss of loved ones, it was also a time that gave rise to new possibilities that we may not have seized without this, albeit unwanted, impetus. It was during the early months of this time that a group of Baptists from across the globe started to meet to read through the 3 volume *Systematic Theology* written by James William McClendon Jr. The group was convened by Rev Dr Andy Goodliff and Professor Curtis Freeman and met monthly on Zoom with the aim of reading each volume on an almost chapter by chapter basis. Each month one or two guests would offer a mini-lecture, engaging with some of the points McClendon was making, and then set a couple of questions for participants to reflect on in smaller breakout rooms. Guests included Lina Toth (Scottish Baptist College), Amy Chilton (Wingate University), Michael Broadway (Shaw University), Craig Gardiner (South Wales Baptist College) and Stanley Hauerwas (Duke University). Those in the sessions included a good number from the USA who were old friends and colleagues of McClendon and their insights into the man behind the writing were often illuminating, giving some of the personal background to the unique approach McClendon takes. I think my favourite comment about McClendon was, "Jim never met a heretic he didn't like."

McClendon's work was not something I had encountered before, his reception in the UK as Andy Goodliff points out in his essay being somewhat muted, due in part to the work's North American focus, with McClendon barely aware or just not concerned with the UK and European Baptist stories. Such a limited reception is something that needs addressing, not least because McClendon claims to be writing a baptist theology, arguing that the baptist tradition (he uses small 'b' to draw in a wider constituency than just those named Baptist) says something different to the Protestant and Catholic strands which he claims have dominated theological output. In particular, what baptists

have to offer is a concern for immediacy, the recognition that 'this is that', meaning for baptists the church today is the primitive church and at the same time is the church at the eschaton, although it should be noted McClendon's approach is more nuanced than a simple biblicism. Baptists are not just reading the story of Scripture, they are living this story, this is the story that they find themselves in. In his essay Goodliff makes suggestions for how to address this lack of attention to McClendon.

Two things will immediately stand out for any reader who has picked up a systematics before. The first is that McClendon eschewed the typical structure of dealing first with doctrine, choosing to begin instead with *Ethics*. He almost dismisses doing so, saying he could have started anywhere, but one senses more purpose in his concern that the church discovers how to live if it is to be the church. McClendon recognises that how we live reveals our convictions, those things apart from which he writes we wouldn't be who we are, something that often gets left to the end or forgotten altogether in other approaches to systematic theology. For McClendon, Christian ethics has three strands, an embodied strand where the emphasis is on the way we live in relation to our human desires, a communal strand which explores what it means to be tied to one another in community, and a resurrection strand which brings an apocalyptic dimension to how the church must live, ultimately insisting that it is only by an encounter with the risen Christ that the church can live faithfully in the world. McClendon writes, 'all of our life is changed by resurrection newness.'[1]

Both Mark Ord and Julian Gotobed reflect on McClendon's use of convictions in their essays. Ord's focus is on those practices that result from and reinforce our convictions, and he sees in McClendon's emphasis on intentionality a significant contribution to theological reflection on the power of practices to form and shape believers, not least in countering the world's practices. McClendon's weakness in this regard, Ord argues, is not to give significant attention to the role of the Spirit. Gotobed's essay focuses more explicitly on how McClendon's notions of 'Convictions' and 'Theology as Convictional Discourse' might offer a more theological resource to the practice of Theological

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[1] James McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Rev Ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 276.

Reflection, which he argues has up to this point leaned too heavily on the social sciences. McClendon's work gives us a way to reflect theologically that take seriously the Bible and Christian Doctrine, although Gotobed laments the limited impact of his own early efforts to see this happen.

The second thing that stands out in McClendon's approach, when starting with *Ethics*, is that he devotes a number of chapters to the biographies of baptists, whose stories McClendon hoped would add flesh to the ideas that he has explored in prior chapters. Those who have read McClendon will know that this is an approach he has tried before, with one of his most widely read (in a US context at least) books being *Biography as Theology*. In *Ethics* he tells the stories of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, in his section on embodied ethics, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the section on communal ethics, and of Dorothy Day, in his section on resurrection ethics. His storytelling is selective, which might be in part due to limited space, but does mean the reader is expected to have some prior knowledge of the characters he has chosen as his examples. It is in this narrow focus that Gale Richards sees flaws, arguing in her essay that by failing to take notice of the social-political context of the Edwards' lives, which made them uncritical participators in a wider slave-owning system, we have a story that undermines the witness for which McClendon selected them. For Richards it is not the use of biography that is at issue but rather being aware of a person's shortcomings when choosing which stories to tell. While this is indeed a disappointing aspect of *Ethics*, not least because the Edwards' story is the first, it does not wholly undermine the value of McClendon's approach. Sadly, when turning to *Doctrine* and *Witness*, McClendon abandons this approach, although there is some limited biography embedded within the chapters of the third volume.[2]

What I have valued most from the two or so years that I spent reading McClendon for the first time was the value of reading him with others and particularly with an international group of Baptists and baptists. It was not just the wisdom of those who knew McClendon better than I did, or the insights of those who had known McClendon as a friend and colleague, that was rewarding. It was more that exploring the

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[2] In particular a chapter on Ludwig Wittgenstein.

questions that McClendon sought to answer in his threee volumes together seemed to me to be the way that baptists should do theology, even over Zoom. I commend these essays to you — written on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the revised edition of *Ethics* — as well worth reading, but more than that as well worth sharing in conversation with others.

Note on Contributor

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The Reception History of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. in the United Kingdom

Andy Goodliff

Abstract

This article seeks to narrate the reception history of James McClendon in the United Kingdom, including a visit he made in 1998. The article explores why McClendon's impact amongst Baptists has been muted.

The background to this article and the articles that follow has been an online group reading of James McClendon's *Systematic Theology*. On May 15, 2020 I tweeted an idea to Curtis Freeman and Steven Harmon[1] of the 'possibility of creating a UK reading group working our way through McClendon's ST.' In the same tweet I noted 'His reception history here [in the UK] has been more muted than it should be.' A copy of McClendon's Systematics had been sitting on my bookshelf for several years, but I had never properly read them. I was aware of how important McClendon was for a number of Baptist theologians active in North America — e.g. Freeman, Harmon, Beth Newman, Barry Harvey, Ryan Andrew Newson, amongst others — whose work I had found stimulating for my own thinking.[2] Later that same day Curtis Freeman and I had planned the first session for June. Every month since then a group of around 30 mostly from UK and the US have met online to discuss a section or chapter from McClendon's Systematics. We completed the reading of McClendon's

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[1] Freeman and Harmon are leading Baptist theologians in the US, teaching at Duke Divinity School and Gardner-Webb University respectively. Freeman was a junior friend of McClendon, collaborating with him (and C. Rosalle Velloso da Silva) on *Baptist Roots: A Reader in Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999). Freeman also wrote a new introduction for the 2012 Baylor University Press edition of McClendon's *Systematic Theology*.

[2] In 1997 Freeman, Newman, Harvey, Mikael Broadway, Philip E. Thompson, and McClendon himself authored together 'Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America', *Perspectives on Religious Studies* 24.3 (Fall, 1997), 303-10. This Manifesto was a stimulus for much of Harmon's *Towards Baptist Catholicity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

final volume, *Witness*, in August 2022. As well as an opportunity to engage our minds with McClendon's theology, the monthly group has also created new friendships and connections.[3] Those from the UK who have been part of the group include those contributing to this special edition of essays. Most of us were reading McClendon for the first time. The articles will mainly focus on the first volume *Ethics*, of which the revised edition is twenty years old this year.[4]

Who was James McClendon?

James McClendon was an American Baptist theologian, who was born in 1924 and died in 2000. He called himself a 'radical baptist.'[5] The lower case 'b' was deliberate, because although denominationally he was a Baptist, he argued for a wider baptist tradition, which encompassed the heirs of the radical reformation and what has been called the believer churches. He is often mentioned alongside Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder[6] as they shared in a similar project and vision of Christian ethics as well as being friends.[7] Both Hauerwas and Yoder were influential in McClendon's thinking and McClendon was definitely helpful to Hauerwas.[8] McClendon authored several

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[3] Each session began with one person offering a short overview and response to the particular chapter in focus. Special guests have included Stanley Hauerwas, Terrence Tilley, Rosalee Ewell Velloso, Stephen Holmes, Ruth Gouldbourne, Jonathan Tran, Paul Fiddes, and Brad Kallenberg.

[4] The first edition was published in 1986. McClendon was able to revise it significantly before he died in 2000, Abingdon publishing it in 2002. Curtis Freeman, in an introduction to the 2012 Baylor edition of McClendon's Systematics, has highlighted the key revisions to the first edition, 'Introduction' in James McClendon, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: Ethics* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2012), xvi-xx.

[5] See his biographical reflection, 'The Radical Road One Baptist Took', *Mennonite Quarterly* 74 (2000): 503-10. Reprinted in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.,* Volume One edited by Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2014).

[6] Yoder's legacy is now very troubling as revelations of his sexual abuse have come to light. See for example Isaac Samuel Villegas, 'The Ecclesial Ethics of John Howard Yoder's Abuse', *Modern Theology* 37.1 (January 2021): 191-214.

[7] See Charles Scriven, 'The Reformation Radicals Ride Again', *Christianity Today*, 5 March 1990, 13-15 which focuses on these three theologians. C.f. D. Stephen Long, 'Protestant Social Ethics' in *The Cambridge Companion to Political Theology* edited by Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Philips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 98-102.

[8] See 'Preface', *Ethics*, 7-8. For Hauerwas' reflections on McClendon see *Hannah's Child* (London: SCM, 2010), 245. Hauerwas was a guest presenter for the McClendon reading group session in November 2020. His most substantial engagement with McClendon is

books, notably *Biography as Theology* and *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, before writing a three volume Systematic Theology (1986-2002), which was immediately novel in it's ordering: *Ethics*, *Doctrine*, and *Witness*. The aim of his Systematic Theology was to write a 'theology "in light of the baptist vision".[9] This intention to write a baptist theology distinguished him from other systematic theologies written by Baptists which have been largely governed by an evangelicalism rather than anything particularly baptist.[10] It is for this reason that his systematic theology is an astonishing achievement; reading McClendon's theology is to read a uniquely creative ordering and understanding of the theological task. In 2010 Hauerwas named it in his top five essential books of the last twenty-five years.[11] There is something exciting about reading McClendon,[12] because of the way he chooses, or perhaps better, the way he is convicted that theology must be done. *Ethics* includes three chapters of biography,[13] each an attempt to display the more theoretical chapters. *Doctrine* is driven by a concern for discipleship, what must the church teach in order to make disciples. *Witness* is in some ways a missiology, addressing religion, science, art and philosophy, ending with a chapter on the university. McClendon did not write a typical systematic theology; it dissents from the norms, like many of the baptist voices on which he draws.

'Reading James McClendon Takes Practice' in *Wilderness Wanderings* (SCM, 2001 [1997]), 171-87, but he also contributed to and co-edited the festschrift in McClendon's honour, *Theology with Foundations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994). Ryan Andrew Newson makes the case that it would be 'wrong to conflate McClendon with his friends', *Inhabiting the World* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 2018), 31.

[9] McClendon, 'Preface', *Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 8.

[10] See, for example, the works of Millard Erickson, James Leo Garrett and even Stanley Grenz. Barry Harvey in one of the McClendon Reading group sessions, quipped that McClendon was 'trying to create a tradition, not follow one.'

[11] The other four books were George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*; John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. See: https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/stanley-hauerwas-5-picks.

[12] Admittedly there is also something frustrating in that often he invites the reader to wish he had said more. The tightness of each of the three volumes means there are some aspects not fully discussed.

[13] The three biographies of Sarah and Jonathan Edwards, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day. This followed *Theology as Biography* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990 [1974]) which had chapters on Dag Hammarskjold, Martin Luther King, Clarence Jordan and Charles Ives. He had planned for *Doctrine* to also include biographical chapters, but the volume became too large to fit them in. *Witness* includes a chapter on Ludwig Wittgenstein.

McClendon and the United Kingdom

In the Preface to the third volume, *Witness*, McClendon mentions a visit to the United Kingdom.[14] This visit saw him give lectures and talks at the London Mennonite Centre; King's College London; Spurgeon's College; Regent's Park College, Oxford; Bristol Baptist College; Offa House, Coventry and the biblical studies department at the University of Manchester.[15] McClendon thanks Alan Kreider,[16] Mark Thiessen Nation[17] and their helpers and associates. This visit took place in March 1998 and it also included an event at the headquarters of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Baptist Missionary Society in Didcot.[18] Two of the helpers and associates who were part of facilitating the visit were Keith Jones[19] and Brian Haymes.[20]

One purpose of the visit at least from the organisers perspective was to introduce McClendon and his theological project to an English audience. Alan Kreider had brought McClendon's theology to the attention of Brian Haymes and Nigel Wright and others through the Anabaptist Network. In 1996 Haymes gave an introduction to McClendon's thinking to the Anabaptist Theological Study Circle,[21]

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[14] This was not his first visit to the UK. In 1962-63 McClendon spent a year at Oxford on sabbatical. See James McClendon, 'A Brief Narrative Account of My Professional Life and Work to the Present' in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Volume One*, 58.

[15] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology Volume 3: Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 8.

[16] Kreider was at that point Director of the Centre for Christianity and Culture, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

[17] Nation was the Director of the London Mennonite Centre. McClendon supervised Nation's PhD on Yoder at Fuller Theological Seminary.

[18] See brief report in *Baptist Times*, March 18, 1998, 2.

[19] Jones at the time was the Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

[20] Haymes was then Principal of Bristol Baptist College.

[21] I have not been able to source a copy of this address, although Ian Randall notes a version he consulted in the papers of Keith Jones.

which began further engagements with his thought that led to the invite and organisation of the 1998 visit.[22]

A recording of McClendon's visit to Baptist House, Didcot exists.[23] He was asked to talk about the subject of whether Baptists were evangelicals. This was in a context of the Baptist Union becoming a more consciously evangelical stronghold in the late 1980s and 1990s.[24] What McClendon does in his lecture is to first ask whether Baptists are Anglicans. He recognises what we have in common, a shared concern for evangelism and historically for overseas mission. He poses whether Baptists and Anglicans are essentially the same or essentially different, the answer not being as straightforward as some would suggest. In asking are Baptists evangelicals, McClendon says what do we mean by evangelical? The word has had different meanings through history. McClendon argues that in the New Testament, it is a way of speaking of the gospel; in the Reformation, it meant those who were followers of Luther; in the eighteenth century, it was a way of describing the Wesleyan revivals; in the twentieth century in America, it was the new name for those who were fundamentalists. In the present, he contends it is more a sociological label, than a theological one, that is, in his context, evangelicals are those associated with Wheaton College, Billy Graham and the magazine *Christianity Today*. His point is that the word evangelical has been and is used in a variety of ways. So what is meant by the question are Baptists evangelicals? This leads McClendon to ask the more important question, in his view, are Baptists baptist? By baptist he means those who hold to the importance of the Bible, of mission, of liberty, of discipleship, and of community.[25] He believes Baptists are 'more or less', but with room for growth. These five features are 'not labels, but targets.' The lecture ends with McClendon making the case for ecumenism. At the beginning of the lecture he gives the analogy of the tree, with all the branches being different traditions and churches of Christianity, stretching higher and further

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[22] See Ian Randall, 'Baptist-Anabaptist Identity among European Baptists since the 1950s' in *Baptists and the World: Renewing the Vision* edited by John H. Y. Briggs and Anthony R. Cross (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), 148.

[23] I am grateful to Julian Gotobed for making it available to me. It's a real joy to actually hear McClendon speaking.

[24] See Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 71-80.

[25] See McClendon, *Ethics*, 27-28.

from the trunk. At the end of the lecture he gives a second analogy of a river with side streams joining the main flow.[26] This is the river of God. Here Christian unity is about what's coming, it's eschatological; unlike the tree analogy, in which Christian unity only lies in the past. Are Baptists anglican? Are Baptists Evangelical? Are Baptists catholic? These are the questions he says are ones he continues to live with. In *Witness* he describes the terms Christian, catholic, evangelical and baptist as 'contested concepts.'[27]

McClendon's visit did not result in any real on-going encounter with his work. There were some attempts to get students at Bristol Baptist College reading McClendon by Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne and Tony Peck during the late 1990s and early 2000s as part of a Baptists Doing Theology module.[28] Later in 1998 Keith Jones, arguably the most enamoured by the McClendon project,[29] moved from Didcot to Prague to become Rector of the International Baptist Theological Seminary.[30] In this new position, with his colleague Parush Parushev, Jones went on to make McClendon a key interlocutor in the seminary's thinking.[31] When IBTS moved to Amsterdam, it developed links with the Vrije Universiteit, and in 2017 the VU (with support from IBTS and others) established the James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Chair for Baptistic and Evangelical Theologies.[32]

McClendon in English Baptist Theology

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[26] The tree and river analogy appear in McClendon, *Witness*, 333-34.

[27] McClendon, *Witness*, 243.

[28] Email correspondence with Haymes, Gouldbourne and Peck.

[29] See Jones' comments in 'Desert Island Books', *Baptist Ministers' Journal* 329 (January 2016): 7.

[30] McClendon had visited IBTS (then named the Baptist Theological Seminary) in 1985 when it was located in Rüscklikon, Switzerland, giving the graduation address entitled 'The baptist Vision'. A version of which can be found in *Baptistic Theologies* 6.1 (2014): 23-35. See Randall, 'Baptist-Anabaptist', 147.

[31] See, for example, Keith Jones, 'Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology', *Journal for European Baptist Studies* 1.1 (2000): 4-18; Mark Thissen Nation, 'James Wm. McClendon, Jr.: A Particular Baptist Theologian', *Journal for European Baptist Studies* 1.2 (2001): 51-55; Parush R. Parushev, 'Carrying out the Theological Task in a Baptistic Way', *Baptistic Theologies* 6.1 (2014): 53-71. Parushev was a student of McClendon's at Fuller. See also IBTS PhDs by Lina Andronoviené, David McMillian and Doug Heidebrecht.

[32] This is currently held by the Dutch Baptist Henk Bakker.

A review of Baptist literature from the 1980s onwards finds only a few references to McClendon.[33] I have been able to find only one book review of any of his works in any of UK baptist publications.[34] He was largely ignored, and his theology is definitely not a reference point in the work of key English Baptist theologians — Paul Fiddes, Nigel Wright, John Colwell, Brian Haymes or Stephen Holmes.[35] This questions the view of Curtis Freeman when he writes that 'theologians throughout Europe and the United Kingdom recognize the importance of McClendon's theology for Baptists.'[36] For each of the English Baptist theologians mentioned their own theological commitments were already in place by the time they came to read him. The reading of McClendon's work did not fit with, or see any need for revision to, their projects. Another reason might also be that McClendon largely ignores the English Baptist tradition, which developed independently of the Anabaptists on the European continent. While there are on-going debates over the relationship, if any, between English Baptists and the European Anabaptists, the traditions depart as much as they may also overlap.[37] In the first edition to *Ethics* McClendon mentions that some 'baptist' thinkers he consulted suggested he 'should start with Calvin, not Anabaptism,'[38] which perhaps would have led him closer to the English tradition. Where McClendon draws on baptist witnesses it is from the Anabaptists, rather than English Baptists, outside of a couple of pages

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[33] The earliest mention of McClendon I have found is an article by Paul Weller in 1990: 'Freedom and Witness in Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective: Part 1', *Baptist Quarterly* 33.6 (April 1990): 252-64. He makes several references to McClendon's article 'What is a "baptist" Theology?', *American Baptist Quarterly* (October 1982): 16-39 and borrows the language of 'baptist vision', Weller, 'Freedom', 255.
[34] A review of *Doctrine* by Lloyd Pietersen in *Anabaptism Today* (October 1996), 22-23. Pietersen's review calls *Doctrine* 'a theological *tour de force*' and gives is a warm recommendation.
[35] With regards to Holmes, he gives brief attention to McClendon's *Systematic Theology*, recognizing McClendon's attempt to work with a 'distinctively Baptist theological methodology', Stephen R. Holmes *Baptist Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 86-87.
[36] Freeman, 'Introduction', xxxi.
[37] For some discussion see David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries* (2nd ed.; Waco, TX: Baylor, 2018 [2010]), 25-41. McClendon mentions Glen Stassen who 'has repeatedly shown that the claim for Baptist independence from Anabaptists is historically mistaken', *Ethics* (2002), 21.
[38] McClendon, 'Preface', *Ethics* (1986), 8.

on John Bunyan in *Ethics*.[39] Among British Baptists, Ian Randall has come closest to McClendon's baptist vision, but reflected in terms of English and European stories. Randall gave the title *Communities of Conviction* to his European Baptist history[40] and in an article on the marks of Baptist identity from a European perspective he finds 'considerable similarity with McClendon's proposals.'[41] There is also a differentiation to be made between English Baptists and their American counterparts; there is overlap, but also again significant differences.[42] McClendon's baptist project is both Anabaptist and American in its sources. The Baptist vision that McClendon was articulating was one that was aimed at dealing with the deficiencies and debates within the American — largely Southern — Baptist context. Finally, Paul Fiddes has suggested another reason, that in the UK there is not something that might be termed Baptist studies, as a shared project of study.[43] While all accredited Baptist ministers are required to complete a module on Baptist History and principles, this is not often part of an academic degree.[44] Theology is done ecumenically, so in

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[39] McClendon, *Ethics* (2002), 67-70. McClendon uses Bunyan as a third witness, alongside Aquinas and Luther, of the interiority of morality. Although, McClendon does suggest that 'Bunyan retained or regained something of the ancient Christian objectivity as well' (67), and 'toward a Christian life where vision and hope converge in the disciples' shared way' (69). In the first edition of *Ethics*, Bunyan represents 'the Christian alternative to decisionism', *Ethics* (1986), 59.

[40] Tony Peck in the 'Foreword' says 'the title of the book owes something to the writings of the late Baptist scholar James William McClendon Jr.', Ian Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Neufeld Verlag, 2009), v.

[41] Ian Randall, 'Tracing Baptist Theological Footprints: A European Perspective', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36.2 (2009): 147. Randall writes about McClendon here: https://blog.ibts.eu/2008/09/02/%e2%80%98mcclendon-and-me/ accessed 4th July 2022.

[42] American Baptists beginnings look back to Roger Williams, and in the twentieth century were shaped by E. Y. Mullins and the conservative take over of the Southern Baptists in the 1980s onwards. See Thomas S. kidd nad Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). There has been no equivalent takeover of the British Baptist life.

[43] Email to the author. Although we should not overlook the series Studies in Baptist History and Thought (2000-2018) published by Paternoster and the more recent Centre for Baptist History and Heritage series, Oxford (2010-) which have both done much to create a body of work, published in the UK, making major contributions to Baptist studies. Here tribute must be paid to Anthony R. Cross, who did much as an editor to establish both series.

[44] While the Oxford Centre for Baptist Studies exists at Regent's Park College, Oxford, there is no corresponding masters level course (currently) that can be taken. There are

Baptist Colleges it is, for example, Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, or Colin Gunton you are more likely to encounter than McClendon.[45] There is also perhaps the point that the English have traditionally not done Systematic Theology,[46] preferring more ad-hoc studies, for example, see the works of David Ford, Paul Fiddes, or Rowan Williams, and therefore students are likely not required to work their way through the Systematic Theology of the likes of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson or Stanley Grenz, to name three relatively recent examples.[47]

Above I mentioned the overlapping of projects between McClendon, Yoder and Hauerwas. The latter two are much more well-known and some British Baptists have drawn on them, for example: Wright in the case of Yoder,[48] and Colwell in the case of Hauerwas.[49] What McClendon might have offered, in terms of a narrative and Anabaptist theology, Wright, Colwell, and others, had already gained from reading Yoder or Hauerwas.[50]

MA level modules on Anabaptist ecclesiology at Bristol Baptist College, but no Baptist equivalent.

[45] Hopefully in the future, if not already, perhaps also Sarah Coakley, James Cone or Kathryn Tanner.

[46] See Colin Gunton's article 'An English Systematic Theology?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 479-96, which ends by arguing for the possibility of an English Systematic Theology. See also his later, 'A Rose by any other Name? From "Christian Doctrine" to "Systematic Theology"', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999): 4-23. Gunton died before he could complete the first volume of such a proposed project, as did his colleague John Webster as well. However, see now the projects of English theologians, Sarah Coakley and Graham Ward, who have both completed the first volume of their planned project. Both these projects, like McClendon's, are unique offerings that do not fit the usual Systematic Theology mode.

[47] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vol (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988-94); Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 Vol (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997-99); Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000 [1994]).

[48] Wright was reading Yoder by *The Radical Kingdom* (Kingsway, 1986), 67-71, and his doctoral work, *Disavowing Constantine* (PhD, 1994, published, Paternoster, 2000) was a comparison of Yoder with Jürgen Moltmann.

[49] Colwell was reading Hauerwas by the late 1980s and Hauerwas looms large in both *Living the Christian Story* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), *Promise and Presence* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) and the shape of *The Rhythm of Doctrine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

[50] This might also be true of Brian Haymes, who refers to Yoder and Hauerwas in his essay 'Baptism as a Political Act' in *Reflections on the Water* edited by Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1996). In a brief contribution to *Coming Home: Stories of*

McClendon is mentioned occasionally by Nigel Wright, but not in any significant way.[51] In *Free Church, Free State*, in describing what he calls the Baptist genetic code, Wright goes first to Stanley Grenz,[52] before offering his own summary. Grenz gets several other references,[53] as does Miroslav Volf's book *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.[54] It is these two thinkers that became more helpful (or closer) to Wright's Baptist vision, despite Wright's shared interest with McClendon in Anabaptist witness.[55] What Wright does borrow from McClendon is the language of 'baptist' representing those groups of church which share a family resemblance with Baptists.[56]

Paul Fiddes first got a copy of *Ethics* in 1988 from Stan Nelson, who was visiting Regent's Park College, Oxford, at the time.[57] Fiddes draws on McClendon as a third witness in a chapter on Baptist identity. The other witnesses are Schleiermacher and Barth, and so McClendon is included as someone outside the 'German' tradition and also as a Baptist. Where Schleiemacher is a witness for experience, Barth a witness for confession, McClendon is a witness for narrative and how 'Baptists understand themselves as living immediately in the scriptural story and in the story of the day of judgment.'[58] Fiddes agrees with McClendon that any denominational theology needs to pay attention to a rich variety of stories, past and present, of its community in describing who they are. Fiddes also mentions McClendon preference for 'baptist' over 'Baptist' as a way of describing Baptist identity by starting with a universal characteristic. Fiddes though does not follow

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Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland (Pandora, 1999), 64, Haymes mentions reading Yoder and Hauerwas, but not McClendon. Paul Fiddes has interacted with Hauerwas in 'Versions of Ecclesiology: Stanley Hauerwas and Nicholas Healy', *Ecclesiology* 12.3 (2016): 331-53.

[51] See *Disavowing Constantine*, 33-34; *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 53; *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), xxviii, n.21.

[52] *Free Church*, 40-42.

[53] *Free Church*, xviii, 125, 137n.34, 202n.7.

[54] *Free Church*, xxiv, 21n.26, 22n.75, 44-45, 116-17, 202n1, 202n.5 264-65.

[55] On Wright's interest in Anabaptism see *The Radical Kingdom*; *Challenge to Change*; *Free Church*; and 'Spirituality as Discipleship: The Anabaptist Heritage' in *Under the Rule of Christ* edited by Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2008).

[56] *New Baptists*, 53; *Free Church*, xxii-xxiii.

[57] Email from Paul Fiddes.

[58] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 10-11.

Wright and prefers starting with the local. A more recent mention of McClendon by Fiddes is in a discussion of saints in one of his chapters in *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*.[59]

John Colwell only makes one mention of McClendon in a footnote in *Living the Christian Story*. In the footnote Colwell claims that McClendon is an example of a 'tendency to match an idealized Christology with an idealized ecclesiology.'[60] This comes in a discussion of pacifism in which Colwell argues that the case made by the likes of Richard Hays, Stanley Hauerwas and McClendon succumbs to docetism. For Colwell, the rule of pacifism, 'idealizes the humanity of Jesus by failing to take sufficient account of the fallenness of the context in which his humanity of was actualized' which leads to a 'corresponding ecclesiological docetism.'[61] This is what Colwell sees in McClendon's description of the Matthean community; it is, says Colwell, too idealized to 'support his pacifist agenda.'[62] This is not a criticism of the whole of McClendon's theology and it is the one time Colwell makes any reference to McClendon and is only mentioned as an example of a wider problem that he perceives in Hauerwas, Hays and others. In an email to me, Colwell writes that he was intrigued by the structuring of McClendon's systematics, but did not think McClendon manages to succeed overall. The first volume being 'most impressive both in style and content.'[63] Colwell is not convinced by McClendon's attempt to write a baptist theology, instead, Colwell has said of himself that his 'aim has always been to engage in catholic theology' as a Baptist.[64] This is perhaps not an entirely fair criticism of McClendon, whose baptist theology always had a catholic and ecumenical perspective in view.[65] McClendon's project was in part a

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[59] Fiddes, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 146-48 referencing the argument McClendon makes in *Biography as Theology*.

[60] Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, 127n.33.

[61] Colwell, *Living*, 126-27.

[62] Colwell, *Living*, 127n.33.

[63] Email to the author dated 7 November 2020.

[64] John E. Colwell, 'The Word of His Grace: What's so Distinctive About Scripture?' in *The "Plainly Revealed" Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* edited by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer, 2011), 191. Elsewhere Colwell writes, 'without any compromise of my Baptist and Reformed convictions I became "catholic,"' *The Rhythm of Doctrine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 6.

[65] See Steven Harmon, 'Engaging James Wm. McClendon, Jr.'s Ecumenical Theology', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (2019): 249-66.

call for baptists (and those who were not baptists) to take their own tradition seriously. Likewise, it might be said that Colwell's own theological contributions have been a call to Baptists (and other free church evangelicals) to take Aquinas, and also Calvin and Barth, more seriously.[66] A comparison of McClendon and Colwell might be an interesting small project.

It is perhaps Ruth Gouldbourne who has found McClendon most helpful to her articulation of Baptist identity. Gouldbourne in several places draws on McClendon's concept of convictions and practices.[67] In discussing the Lord's Supper, she begins with McClendon and how 'our practices demonstrate our convictions.'[68] Similarly in a chapter on ministry, she says 'we want to start with McClendon's category of "remembering signs" in examining the role of ministry.'[69] An article on liturgy and transformation also starts with McClendon: 'underpinning this approach is a commitment to the description of theology and its task that is articulated by James Wm. McClendon Jr.'[70] Finally, a chapter on the communion of saints draws on McClendon's hermeneutic that 'this is that,'[71] to argue for the relationship between believers across time, and death, because of the same relationship shared with Christ by virtue of the Spirit. Even where McClendon is not directly mentioned, his baptist vision can be discerned implicitly in the argument. Gouldbourne has not produced a book-length treatment of Baptist theology that might make explicit the full debt McClendon's work has offered to her own thinking, but she is perhaps the most prominent example of a British Baptist,[72] who has been shaped by

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[66] All three theologians feature heavily in *Living the Christian Story*, *Promise and Presence*, and in *Rhythm of Doctrine*.

[67] In addition to those I mention, see also her third IBTS Hughey Lecture given in 1998.

[68] Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *On Being the Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 123. I am making the informed judgment that Gouldbourne wrote the chapters on the Lord's Supper and ministry in this volume.

[69] Haymes et al, *On Being the Church* (2008), 158.

[70] Ruth Gouldbourne, 'Liturgical Identity Carriers for Ecclesial Transformation', *American Baptist Quarterly* (2012): 380.

[71] Ruth Gouldbourne, ' "We are Gathered with the Millions": Celebrating the Communion of Saints' in *Gathering Disciples* edited by Myra Blyth and Andy Goodliff (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 175-76.

[72] Gouldbourne is Scottish by birth and upbringing, but her ministry of over 30 years has been in England. On Gouldbourne, see Beth Allison-Glenny and Andy Goodliff, 'Appreciating Ruth Gouldbourne', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* 4 (October 2021).

reading McClendon. In an email she wrote "'this is that" deeply shapes
my reading of Scripture and leading of worship, and the notion of a
convictional community, and the importance of conviction being that
which shapes what one actually does, rather than any official statement
seems to me so self-evident that I guess it has also gone very deep.'[73]
She also said he is 'one of the writers I go back to again and again.'
Gouldbourne's interest in McClendon was something she passed onto
Christopher Ellis,[74] who also draws on McClendon concept of a
'convictional community'[75] in *Gathering*, his study of Baptist worship.
The values identified in Baptist worship, says Ellis, are part of the
convictions that 'constitute the faith and spirituality of the Baptist
community.'[76] McClendon provides a conceptual framework to
support and justify Ellis' claims.[77] This is a good example of
McClendon's work put to practice, however, while he is used, there is
no embrace by Ellis of his broader baptist vision.

McClendon and British Theology

I should mention here that McClendon's theology has not generated
much engagement amongst other (non-baptist) British theologians
either. This is probably to do with some of the same reasons already
mention earlier. David Fergusson references McClendon in a
discussion of ecclesial ethics that focuses mostly on Hauerwas.[78]
Christopher Rowland describes in passing 'McClendon's remarkable
Systematic Theology,'[79] but does not elaborate further. Harriet Harris

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[73] Email to the author, dated 10 November 2020.

[74] Ellis mentions Gouldbourne as someone who 'listened and questioned as I was
formulating the arguments which shaped this book', *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality
of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004), viii. In an email to the author,
Ellis writes that he 'only really engaged with his writings in conversations with Ruth after
my arrival in Bristol in 2000', dated 13 November 2020.

[75] Ellis, *Gathering*, 230-31, 235, 268n.5, 297.n18.

[76] Ellis, *Gathering*, 231.

[77] For some connections between McClendon and Ellis, see Robert Ellis, "Help us to
Search for Truth": Baptists and Doing Theology' in *Gathering Disciples* edited by Myra
Blyth and Andy Goodliff (Eugene: OR, Pickwick, 2017), 1-24.

[78] David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1998), 48-79.

[79] Christopher Rowland, "'The first will be last, and the last first": practical theology and
equality' in *Public Theology for the 21st Century* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 335. Elsewhere
he has written of gaining 'wisdom and insight from Jim McClendon … whose original
approach to systematic theology I applaud and from whose insight, wisdom, and

reviewed *Doctrine* in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.[80] Oliver O'Donovan makes a brief critique of McClendon, along with Barth, in the Prologue to the second edition of *Resurrection and Moral Order*.[81] One positive, but again brief, use of McClendon and his notion of convictions can be found in Pete Ward's *Liquid Ecclesiology*.[82] This is about the extent of references to McClendon in British theology and ethics.

Reading McClendon Today

The set of articles in this volume recognises that a new generation are discovering McClendon. It is too early to say whether this will generate significant engagement with McClendon's theological contribution. Joshua Searle, a Tutor at Spurgeon's College and Lina Toth, Tutor at the Scottish Baptist College (both former students of IBTS) are two people within the Baptist Colleges who have found McClendon helpful to their own work.[83] This may see more students at Spurgeon's and at the Scottish College encountering McClendon's baptist vision. It is certainly the case that an increase of people reading and thinking with McClendon will most likely happen through his becoming part of required reading in the Colleges.

It is the hope that what it is offered in the following reflections will encourage others to see McClendon as a worthwhile theological mind to read for Baptists considering what it means to live as the church today (*Ethics*), what it is the church must teach (*Doctrine*), and how the church might *Witness*. Any reading of McClendon in the UK today

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encouragement I have derived great benefit', Christopher Rowland, 'Anabaptism and radical Christianity', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74.4 (October 2000).

[80] Harriet Harris, 'Review: James McClendon, *Systematic Theology Vol. 2: Doctrine*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.1 (February 1998), 126-29.

[81] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (2nd Ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), xvi.

[82] Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 27-29, 53-54.

[83] See for example, Joshua Searle, 'The Ecumenical Imperative and the Kingdom of God', *Journal for European Baptist Studies* 14 (2013): 5-23; Lina Andronoviené (now Toth), *Transforming the Struggles of Tamars* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014). Both Joshua and Lina were part of the online McClendon reading group referred to at the beginning. See also now Tim Welch (Bristol Baptist College) recent article on McClendon as a practical theologian in *Attending the Margins: Essays in Honour of Stephen Finamore* edited by Helen Paynter and Peter Hatton (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2022), 337-65.

cannot simply re-appropriate his work, because the context and concerns among Baptists in the UK are different to those that he was addressing in the US. Moreover the entire project is now over twenty years old and theology has moved on.[84] One helpful and important development of McClendon can be found Ryan Andrew Newson's *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective*. Newson begins with McClendon's baptist vision but seeks to extend it and revise it for the present: '[McClendon's] work provides a series of signposts that are worth following *in via*.'[85]

Paul Fiddes' point that we do not have something called Baptist studies is something perhaps that also needs to be remedied.[86] This is not to suggest that Baptists should separate themselves and only read the work of Baptists, this would go against McClendon's attempt to offer a baptist theology in conversation with Protestant and Catholic theology. It is to suggest that there might be value in giving more attention to theological work that takes its b/Baptist heritage and context seriously. This would mean reading McClendon, but McClendon in conversation and dialogue with the English Baptist tradition, and a wider b/Baptist tradition, and one in dialogue with other communion of churches, for example, the conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Anglican Communion, and those with the Roman Catholics.[87] This might have the advantage of forming ministers and shaping churches that are more conscious of their identity as Baptists.

Note on Contributor

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[84] As Robert Jenson remarks at the beginning of his own Systematic Theology that 'it is the fate of all dogmatic systems to be dismembered' and used in the constructions of other systems, Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18.

[85] Ryan Andrew Newson, *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 2018), 26.

[86] Here we might note the renaming of the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage at Regent's Park College in 2019 as the Oxford Centre for Baptist Studies.

[87] On the latter see the work of Steven Harmon, for example, *Baptists, Catholics and the Whole Church* (New York: New City Press, 2021).

A Baptist Among the Practices

Mark Ord

Abstract

James McClendon Jr. was a significant, though underacknowledged, contributor to the development of post-liberal theology. His work on biography and convictions fashioned theological tools for the development of both narrative and practice-based theologies. His baptist heritage and rooting engendered a particular interest in theological reflection on practice and enabled a distinctive insight. This article explores McClendon's distinctively baptist interest in the intentions of those involved in any given practice, as well as his perceptive reflections on the overarching influence of 'principalities and powers' on those engaged in what he terms 'powerful practices.' The article queries whether McClendon has left enough space, between the intention of the individual and the powers inherent in practice, for the activity of God, exercised through the mediation of practices.

Introduction: McClendon's Non-Foundationalist Baptist Theology

Stanley Hauerwas states that James McClendon was 'teaching us how to do theology in a world without foundations before anyone knew what anti-foundationalism was'.[1] Certainly McClendon was in the thick of developments among American theologians working towards a post-foundationalist theology in the 1970s and 1980s. His early

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[1] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 33.

writings on *Biography as Theology* and *Convictions* were in the mix of those contributions that cohered over time into narrative or postliberal theology.[2] In the company of theologians such as John Howard Yoder, George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas, McClendon underscored the particularity of the Christian narrative, along with its grammar and practices, as a means of dislodging the universal categories of reason and experience from their place of privilege in theological and philosophical discourse. His theology is consciously postmodern, influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin and the notion that language, rather than functioning in terms of representation, is rooted in and shapes particular forms of social life.[3] McClendon puts the focus on the convictions of faith communities and the form of life that such convictions engender. He distinguished convictions from principles in 1974 in the following term: 'the latter are of the head, the former of the gut; principles are more often consciously formed, convictions more often unconsciously lived by or out. Convictions in this view are affective and volitional as well as cognitive'.[4] Hauerwas attributes McClendon's compelling presentation of theology without foundations to his philosophical astuteness along with 'his determined stance to do theology in the baptist tradition'.[5]

By beginning his systematic theology with ethics, McClendon notes that he is dispensing with the discipline's usual philosophical underpinnings. These typically led theologians to begin with an examination of first principles, or foundations, before proceeding to discuss doctrines, and only then move on to the consideration of ethics; 'the conduct or decisions that "flow from" the given doctrines'.[6] In keeping with his postliberal sensibilities McClendon is, much like Hauerwas at the same time, proposing an approach to Ethics that focuses on 'those practices that make the church the

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[2] James W. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002 [1990]); James Wm. McClendon and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002 [1994]).
[3] James W. McClendon, Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies' in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.* Volume Two edited by Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 53-53.
[4] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 163.
[5] Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 33.
[6] James. Wm. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology* Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 41.

church'.[7] To focus first on practices puts the emphasis on character, formed in communities rather than on 'the study of the choosing will as it makes decisions'.[8] He proposes a holistic theology, not one broken down into discrete elements of thought and application, and offers a confessional ethics, rooted in narrative, character and community, rather than presuppositions of universal and univocal rationality. McClendon argues for the 'chronological priority' of ethics and insists that each component of a systematic theology has the same object: 'the convictions of the community'. Each has the same goal, that of providing 'a faithful and transformative account of those convictions that cohere in a living community.'[9]

The fusion of non-foundationalist theology with what he terms the 'baptist vision' comes to mature expression in McClendon's systematic theology. Curtis Freeman has observed that with the publication in 1986 of *Ethics*, the first volume of McClendon's systematic theology, 'it became clearer how an alternative postliberalism might fit within a baptist vision.'[10] McClendon saw an affinity between the then new theological movement and the 'baptist vision', though one that needed establishing. This involved a challenge to the alignment of Baptist principles with Modernity's individualism and rationalism, which has long characterised the Baptist tradition and had reached the point of caricature in some parts of McClendon's American context.[11] In order to affect this realignment McClendon proposes what he terms a 'small b' baptist tradition; one that stretches back to the first Anabaptist communities and leaders and also includes exemplary Christians not normally identified with the Baptist tradition, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day.[12] He recasts the biblicism that has been prominent in Baptist convictions, along with the place of the gathered community and the emphasis on mission and discipleship, as a self-involving narrative theology that shapes a particular form of life. The link between the present-day church and the narrative of the New Testament church is tight in McClendon's baptist vision. He points to

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[7] Hauerwas, In Good Company, 36

[8] McClendon, *Ethics*, 47.

[9] McClendon, *Ethics*, 45

[10] Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 32.

[11] Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 14, 193.

[12] McClendon, *Ethics*, 19, 27ff.

a baptist 'shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community.'[13] He sums this 'mystical and immediate' awareness up with the slogan, 'this is that.'[14] This resonates with McClendon's postliberal contemporary George Lindbeck's argument that the scriptures, for those steeped in them, are 'able to absorb the universe.'[15] McClendon argues that such claims are assessed by their capacity to 'give form or shape to a shared life in Christ Jesus', and will be tested 'only in the arena of that life itself.'[16] The attempt to bring to expression a baptist vision, as opposed to a confession of faith, is significant. McClendon was, again, trying to conjure a framework that goes beyond propositions to which baptists may assent, or, more likely, fall out over. He describes the baptist vision as 'the guiding stimulus by which a people (or as here, a combination of peoples) shape their life and thought . . . the continually emerging theme and tonic structure of their common life'.[17] Barry Harvey points out that McClendon, in his articulation of a baptist vision, 'is heir to the Aristotelian tradition of practical reasoning.'[18] McClendon is looking for something in keeping with Pierre Bourdieu's 'habitus' or Charles Taylor's 'social imaginary.'[19] Bourdieu and Taylor use these terms respectively to get at a precognitive form of knowing. One that is shaped through narratives, symbols and rituals and is transmitted across generations within a given social context as embodied and practical knowledge. McClendon's understanding and proposal of the baptist vision is similar to those of the habitus and the social imaginary, except to note that it is less stable, perhaps less conservative. Ryan Andrew Newson notes that for McClendon the 'immediacy' of this vision means 'the gains made through the baptist vision in one generation may not pass

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[13] McClendon, *Ethics*, 31.

[14] McClendon, *Ethics*, 33.

[15] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1984), 117.

[16] McClendon, *Ethics*, 31.

[17] McClendon, *Ethics*, 27-28.

[18] Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 7, cited in Ryan Andrew Newson, *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018), 151.

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78-86; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 159-211.

on to the next.'[20] The difference is likely to be in the place McClendon, like Yoder, attributes to the voluntary principle at the heart of his baptist ecclesiology. The baptist vision is, as Newson puts it, a 'haunting, wild possibility rather than a tameable, steady tradition.'[21] One that nonetheless arises in concrete historical contexts, is embraced by those who choose to follow Christ and in turn engenders a form of life.

McClendon argued that these new sensibilities provided the context and impetus for baptists to make good on an often-noted theological deficit. He explains the reason for the lack of theological output among baptists in the following terms: 'in their variety and disunity (baptists) failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices and patterns, their own guiding vision, a resource for theology.'[22] McClendon saw in postliberal, non-foundationalist theology, with its emphasis on the particularity of narrative, communal practices, and character, the conditions for baptists to make a long overdue theological contribution. Certainly, McClendon's particular take on postliberal theology has had an impact although, as I will explore below, he diverged from many of his contemporaries in situating his theology of practice within the context of the wider world, rather than focusing primarily on ecclesial settings.[23] The timestamp on his theology is, again, significant. McClendon was writing about practice well before the focus on practices became the 'methodological mantra' that Sarah Coakley warned in 2002 was reaching 'explicative overload.'[24] More recently still, and two decades after the publication of McClendon's *Ethics*, James K.A. Smith has sought to articulate an 'affective pedagogy' which moved beyond the Enlightenment view of persons as 'thinking things.'[25] Instead of McClendon's proposed baptist

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[20] Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 156.
[21] Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 156.
[22] McClendon, *Ethics*, 26.
[23] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 16.
[24] Sarah Coakley, 'Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology' in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* edited by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 78.
[25] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009).

convictions, Smith favoured a return to Augustinian desire, viewing humans as 'desiring animals'. The common themes with McClendon though were the 'of the gut' nature of desire and conviction, as well as the priority given to the practices of a community as the means for forming and directing both convictions and desire.[26] Beyond these aggregated themes, as I will explore further below, McClendon came at the issue of practices in a distinctive fashion, one he felt resonated with the baptist vision.

The Three Strands of Ethics and the 'in-between-ness' of practices

If McClendon's decision to begin his systematic theology with ethics shows him to be at home in the new milieu of postliberal theological thinking, the structure he proposes for the text of *Ethics* confirms that he is an innovative and insightful theologian within this movement. McClendon divides *Ethics* into three parts, or strands: the organic, the communal and the anastatic. These strands represent three interweaved ways 'in which we have to do with God . . . as embodied selves in an environment . . . as social persons, members of a society . . . as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'.[27] McClendon considers each strand sequentially, though it is in weaving them together that he proposes to find a single approach to ethics. He notes that each 'account is true, but it is not the whole truth.'[28] The Scripture he cites at the outset of Ethics captures the sense of his stranded approach: 'A threefold cord is not quickly broken' (Ecclesiastes 4: 12). The category of practice is a common denominator across the strands and a significant part of what enables the interweaving that McClendon states is necessary for a Christian ethics. In the organic, or bodily, strand McClendon identifies basic human needs, which range from food to companionship, right through to prayer. He connects these needs with human drives or impulses, such as sex and aggression, and with the feelings and judgements - such as delight and horror, shame, blame and guilt - that human persons develop as they cope with their core needs and drives.

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[26] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 26, 40.
[27] McClendon, *Ethics*, 65.
[28] James Wm. McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*. Volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 33.

These he terms 'the moral equipment of the body'. McClendon links this bodily moral equipment to the social strand with the two-way observation that virtue has 'an organic base' and, at the same time, even the most basic human drives and needs are coped with and met socially.[29] It is in the organic strand that McClendon first broaches Alasdair MacIntyre's reflection on virtues and how they are cultivated through communal practices. Referring to both MacIntyre and Hauerwas, McClendon points to the 'the grounding of the virtues in the shared practices . . . of a particular 'traditional' community . . . or in a shared story sufficiently truthful to form our characters in coherence with its truth'.[30] McClendon illustrates this with reference to the virtue of hope, which he takes to have a bodily basis but which obtains specificity — 'particular content' — through the human experience of community and the shared narratives and practices that this entails.[31]

In the second strand, the communal or social, McClendon puts forward an analysis of how 'practices, when united by a narrative bond, provide the very stuff or matrix of social morality'.[32] In this strand McClendon gives his fullest treatment of the dynamic by which character, and indeed community, is shaped by social practices which are rooted in a shared narrative. I will explore this in detail below. These first two strands are, however, incomplete without the resurrection strand. McClendon's argument in the anastatic strand is twofold. Firstly, the community of those gathered in the light of the resurrection enter into a particular narrative; one that connects them to the story of Jesus and opens them to the ongoing story of the whole world. Secondly, this narrative experience generates a new set of practices. McClendon offers a reflection on the practice of baptism as well as exploring the historical example of the earliest baptists at Schleitheim in Switzerland, where 'a radical believers' community found a way to develop resurrection ethics into a second-strand social fabric'.[33] With these comments McClendon is not reducing the resurrection to the phenomenological description of a set of practices. Rather he is describing congregational practices that are animated by a

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[29] McClendon, *Ethics*, 91 and 104.
[30] McClendon, *Ethics*, 105.
[31] McClendon, *Ethics*, 106.
[32] McClendon, *Ethics*, 184.
[33] McClendon, *Ethics*, 269.

'mystical and immediate presence'.[34] 'A resurrection ethic contains a dynamic power to turn back into the social strand the energies of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'.[35] Within this strand McClendon gestures beyond sociological descriptions of practice towards a theological understanding of practices. This is something that within the Baptist context John Colwell has developed, in his understanding of ecclesial practices, such as preaching and the sacraments, as means of 'indwelling the gospel' and simultaneously being indwelt by the Holy Spirit.[36]

McClendon's proposal of three strands for ethics has proved durable, or at least the thinking behind it was prescient. It can be compared with James K.A. Smith's Cultural Liturgies project which emphasises practices as embodied, rooted in a social habitus and being directed towards a telos, or end, by both the dynamic inherent in communal practices and that of the Holy Spirit.[37] Similarly, Sarah Coakley frames the first volume of her own systematic theology, and her proposed *théologie totale*, in terms of reflection on the body, practices of prayer and the development of doctrine.[38] Both Coakley and Smith, like McClendon before them, articulate a form of knowledge that takes seriously human embodiment, sociality and encounter with God.

Practices and Intentions

McClendon gives detailed attention to practices within the social strand of his *Ethics*. He begins his reflections with reference to Alasdair MacIntyre's influential insights on practices and virtues.[39] Though focused on all manner of social practices, MacIntyre's recuperation of Aristotle's reflections on virtue has been theologically fruitful and has

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[34] Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 46.
[35] McClendon, *Ethics*, 273.
[36] John Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 131ff.
[37] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2013); Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017).
[38] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[39] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

provided conceptual resources to those theologians keen to root theology and ethics in ecclesial and liturgical practices. MacIntyre defines practice in the following terms:

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[40]

The attractiveness of this definition of practices is that it holds together critical aspects of postliberal concern; narrative, community, character and virtue. It also facilitates a positive theological proposal for those worried about excessively pragmatic approaches to the challenge of worship, witness and mission within the secular and consumerist West. The notion of practice holds together the coherence of the means and the goal of all Christian action.

McClendon starts his reflection on practices acknowledging the significance of MacIntyre's work. He immediately offers a supplement to MacIntyre's heavyweight Aristotelian reflections on practices, however, via Bernard Suits' whimsical and insightful outline of the concept of games, in *The Grasshopper*.[41] McClendon insists that this is not to replace reflection on practices with a theology of play but a way into a deeper engagement with practices. Suits defines game-playing as follows:

'To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity'.[42]

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[40] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175.
[41] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).
[42] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 34, cited in McClendon, *Ethics*, 163.

McClendon draws attention to Suits' further comment, that 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles'.[43] He observes that games, according to Suits' analysis, have a set of characteristics that approximate to MacIntyre's account of practices. Firstly, games have goals that precede the aim of winning, for example placing a ball through a hoop. Secondly, they have means that are accepted by all players, such as not being able to carry the ball while moving. Thirdly, games have rules, the breaching of which may not rule out reaching the goal but represent stepping outside the game itself. The last characteristic that Suit identifies in his concept of a game pertains more to the players than to the games themselves. He terms it the 'lusory attitude' of the player, which he defines as a player's intention to play the game.

McClendon demonstrates the coherence of this approach to games by relaying Suits' differentiation between three types of non-player - triflers, cheats and spoilsports - and authentic players. The trifler recognises the rules of a given game but not the goal. Triflers may range from those playing cards to be sociable, playing tennis to get fit or playing any game for financial reward. The trifler substitutes other goals for those of the game itself. Cheats, on the other hand, accept the goals but not the rules of the game. This can include holding more cards than the game permits, simulating injury to gain an advantage, or taking performance-enhancing drugs. Lastly, spoilsports recognise neither the rules nor the goals of a game but disrupt the game for their own ends. Players, of course, recognise both goals and rules, striving for excellence in the established means of the game. McClendon notes several parallels between MacIntyre's outline of practice and Suits' presentation of games. 'Social practices, like games, strive for some end beyond themselves . . . require intentional participation on the part of practitioners, employ determinate means, and proceed according to rules'.[44]

It would not seem that very much hangs on McClendon's detour through Suits' ludic scheme and not many have followed him in taking it. It is, however, a useful heuristic device. The types represented by

[43] McClendon, *Ethics*, 164.
[44] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 28.

Suit's trifler, cheat and spoilsport provide a useful means of evaluating participation in a variety of Christian practices, for example evangelism. McClendon makes this point in his reflections on the goal of mission. He asserts that 'when the church's defining characteristic becomes growth, its highest goal the making of converts, then… the church exists only as an extrinsic instrument, a means to something that it is not… If the goal is to win others who will win others who will win others, an infinite regress of mere recruitment has taken the place of any real (or realistic) understanding of the point of evangelism'.[45] The church in this case, no matter how earnest its outreach, would be trifling with evangelism. If the methods of evangelism were, for example, particularly manipulative churches may even find themselves labelled as cheats.[46]

Beyond the heuristic benefits of Suits' proposal, the real gain for McClendon in taking the detour of Suits' presentation is that it enables him to bring to the fore a Baptist concern with intentionality. The role of intention, the lusory attitude, is clearer in Suit than it is in MacIntyre. McClendon underlines this payoff. 'No one will be said to be marrying, or practising medicine or architecture (any more than one would be said to play a game) who does not intend to achieve its goals by such recognisable, in other words rule-describable, means'.[47] McClendon, as noted above, has been critical of 'decisionism' in ethics, or more generally modernity's intellectualist construal of human being. He is not, however, content to remain with a phenomenology of practice that focuses primarily on kinaesthetics and physiology, or even one that gives most weight to the impact of narrative and ritual in human formation. In the interests of a free church, or voluntary, ecclesiology he carves out space for the intentions of the Christian involved in any ecclesial practice. Linda Aadne, gets to the heart of this Baptist concern over practices when discussing, appreciatively, James K.A. Smith's practice-based 'affective pedagogy'. She poses a typically Baptist question. 'Where can we situate the agency of spiritual

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[45] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 439.
[46] Cf. Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 33-34.
[47] McClendon, *Ethics*, 167.

formation?'[48] Aadne is uneasy about Smith's qualified acceptance of the role of automation within practices and expresses this unease from within a 'believers church tradition'; one that seeks to evidence 'the conscious response of the faith of individuals who freely chose to enter into Christ'.[49] Aadne's comments come in a discussion of Christian formation and the role of the sacraments, which is frequently a context for reflections on embodied practices. When McClendon comes to consider the sacraments, or as he terms them 'remembering signs', in the second volume of his systematic theology, Doctrine, he will underline that in these acts 'human action and divine action converge'.[50] In his detailed consideration of practices, however, McClendon underscores human intention; an emphasis that traditionally sits well with Baptist ecclesiological convictions. He locates the agency in practices within the human sphere. This argument has been the principle bulwark for Baptists against the reduction of the sacraments to a mechanical or magical presentation.[51] As Paul Fiddes has observed, Baptists have an historic aversion to the doctrine of *ex opere operato* and it would seem that McClendon's 'small b baptists' are no exception.[52]

McClendon's position contrasts with other theologians who have wanted to supplement MacIntyre's definition of practice in a more fully theological fashion; viewing sacraments, and ecclesial practices in general, as 'habitations of the Spirit', or means of 'suffering divine things'.[53] Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, for example, note that their early work on practices 'relied on MacIntyre', but that they soon felt the need for a theological definition of practices that gave expression to the conviction that such practices 'are set in a world created and sustained by a just and merciful God, who is in the midst of

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[48] Linda Aadne, 'The Sacramental Practices of the Believing Community' in *Baptist Sacramentalism 3* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Eugene, MI: Pickwick, 2020), 152, 157.
[49] Aadne, 'Sacramental Practices', 151.
[50] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 389.
[51] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 388.
[52] Fiddes, Paul, '*Ex Opere Operato*: Re-thinking a Historic Baptist Rejection', in *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).
[53] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (2nd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

reconciling this world through Christ'.[54] As I have noted above, John Colwell has provided such a theological account from a Baptist perspective, presenting Scripture, proclamation and the sacraments as forms of mutual 'indwelling' between God and the believer. There is no suggestion that McClendon would object to such theological developments. It does, though, put in relief that McClendon's own supplement to MacIntyre's thinking was to commend the role of human intention for the efficacy of practices.

This is not to deny that McClendon makes a contribution here to theological reflection on practices. Those concerned with ecclesial practices face a formidable critique in the observation that engagement in ecclesial practices often does not produce the virtues that are touted by those espousing Aristotelian virtue ethics. As Robin Gill concedes, 'actual church people don't look much like 'resident aliens' but rather look a lot like everybody else'.[55] James K.A. Smith terms this 'the Godfather problem', noting the liturgical framing of Coppola's cinematic trilogy. Smith acknowledges that there are 'people who have spent entire lifetimes immersed in the rites of historic Christian worship who nonetheless emerge from them not only unformed but perhaps even malformed'.[56] Aadne argues from the Baptist tradition that formalism is implicated in this malformation. John Howard Yoder, from an anabaptist perspective, makes a similar point; 'this is the point where voluntaryism makes all the difference. You can make people come to church, but you cannot make them love one another'.[57] At the outset of theological reflections on practices McClendon, then, makes a significant contribution when he adds intention to the definition of practice.

McClendon's stance on intention does, however, blur some of the important gains in focusing on practices. Pierre Bourdeau points to the

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[54] Volf and Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology*, 21.

[55] Robin Gill, *Church Going and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) in Christian Scharen, *Public Worship and Public Work: Character and Commitment in Local Congregational Life* (Liturgical Press, 2004) 38. The reference to 'resident aliens' is to Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashvillle, TN: Abingdon, 1989).

[56] Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 167.

[57] John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* edited by Michael Cartwright, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 82.

'cunning' of embodied pedagogies, such as rituals, being that they 'extort what is essential while seeming to demand the insignificant'.[58] Part of this logic is that they work at a kinaesthetic, or bodily level, without engaging necessarily or principally the cognitive or intentional faculties. This is what Bourdieu means in his discussion of tradition and custom, when he states that 'the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition'[59] Practices, which are traditioned behaviour, work at precognitive levels, not announcing themselves for analysis and decision. Bourdieu's thinking on practices is set within his broader notion of the 'habitus'. The term itself is a reference to Aristotle's concern with habits, but carries the sense of something like an ecosystem of combined practices, symbols and narratives which Bourdieu presents as more than simply the backdrop to human life, rather as an 'active presence'.[60] The habitus develops the sense of what is 'second nature' for those immersed in it. It is 'significant without intending to signify'.[61] Hauerwas and Wells discuss worship in similar terms when they note that through liturgical practices 'God trains his (sic) people to take the right things for granted'.[62] Such training happens through participation over time. This is not to say that intention doesn't matter. It is, though, to recognise that intention is a broader category than individualism allows. Practices convey the intentions, as well as the convictions, of a community over time. Bourdieu refers to the activity of the past as an 'objective intention . . . which always outruns . . . conscious intention'.[63] It is in this sense that McClendon's discussion of the baptist vision coincides with Bourdieu's habitus. There is more at play in such a vision than an individualist voluntarism, there is the diachronic intention of the community of believers. Beyond, and among, that there is the working of the Holy Spirit. McClendon's recourse to a theory of games is in fact a help at this point. Contrary to his claim, playing tennis as a trifler, with motives as varied as to keep fit, to make friends or to win millions, is still to play tennis. The cunning of the practice may overtime draw such a player into a fuller appreciation of the game and

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[58] In Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 97.
[59] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 167.
[60] Bourdieu cited in *Imagining the Kingdom*, 84.
[61] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 79-80.
[62] Samuel Wells and Stanley Hauerwas (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 25.
[63] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 79.

a delight in playing it well. This may, in fact, be a part of the genius of the game and the community that invented and plays it.

Bourdieu's reflections on the habitus, like MacIntyre's presentation of practices, has been theologically generative. Given due theological reflection it is a resource for articulating that the Holy Spirit is not limited to vying with autonomous rational individuals in the work of sanctification, hamstrung but for the power of persuasion aimed at changing minds. As I have already stated McClendon offers, albeit briefly, such a theological reading when he discusses Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in which he presents three forms of agency, belonging to God, the believer and the church. My argument here is simply that such a reading is absent in the most explicit treatment McClendon gives to practices.

It may be that McClendon's three strand structure for *Ethics* is, despite its many strengths, actually a weakness here. McClendon sees a unified ethics emerging from his treatment of three separate strands, the organic, the social and the resurrection strands. He reminds his readers that the strands are insufficient when laid out alone. They require weaving. All the same, McClendon separates out the strands for careful analysis, rather than attempt to deal with what Coakley describes as the 'messy entanglement' of body, practice and doctrine.[64] The entanglement itself, as Coakley has demonstrated, may convey much that is theologically important. In his tidy presentation McClendon runs the risk that important characteristics of practice slip between the strands. The issue of intention may be illustrative of this weakness. As I have outlined, McClendon lays considerable emphasis on the importance of intentionality for practice in the social strand of his *Ethics*. The separate and preceding reflection on practice as embodied or organic may have problematised this common-sense emphasis on intention. It may have hinted, in fact, at an 'intentional fallacy'. James K. A. Smith has drawn attention to the fuzzy area between embodiment, cognition and community when we come to discuss intentions, which we habitually associate with the will. Through engagement with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu he notes that decision-making and forms of knowledge are located somewhere between the body, the community whose practices

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[64] Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 190.

shape us, and our rational capacities. These thinkers attempt to locate knowing in the 'messy complexity of our being-in-the-world', between oversimplified binaries such as intellect and instinct, minds and bodies.[65] Smith points to the form of knowledge that Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu uncover. It is a 'hybrid' knowing carried in the body and acquired through embodied practices; a 'feel for the game' attained through engaging in socially structured practices. McClendon is seeking a similar sort of knowledge, as I have already noted, when he refers to a baptist vision as opposed to baptist doctrine, and he attempts to get at it by identifying the various strands involved in how we come to know and navigate the world. Yet, as Smith has pointed out, the sense of in-between-ness is crucial here, and ironically in McClendon's sequential analysis it is this that risks falling through the strands. McClendon intended to open up a baptist theology that is able to move beyond Modernity, one that is open to narrative, embodiment and character. His elevation of intention, and particularly his restriction of intention to that of the person, the individual, involved in a given practice, while addressing an ongoing problem in theological reflection on practices, may also obscure the gains that have been made through the focus on practices as part of an 'affective pedagogy'.

Powerful Practices and the rehabilitation of Powers, Principalities and the World

McClendon's most significant contribution to theological engagement with the topic of embodied practices is his designation of them as 'powerful practices'. By this, he intends to underline that practices are not innocuous. Interestingly, in the light of the comments above, it is here that we see McClendon going beyond the area of intention in his reflections on practice. Central to his notion of powerful practices is the insight that they are not reducible to things we do as agents. They are the means by which human being is acted upon. This statement has two sides to it: that practices evade the will in the sense of Bourdieu's 'cunning of ritual' and, more importantly for McClendon, that practices are the sites of other wills, other actors. In the organic strand McClendon has already examined practices as active at the intersection of instinct, communal narrative and behaviour. The first

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[65] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 58 and 85.

port of call in McClendon's reflection on practices within the communal strand of *Ethics*, one essential for his designation of them as 'powerful' is the work of both Jacques Ellul and John Howard Yoder on the New Testament terminology of 'principalities and powers'.[66] He takes the work of these scholars to be 'an authentic recovery of a concept that had been lost to view in the course of Christian history,'[67] one that illuminates how practices come to exert an influence on human being in the world. McClendon lists seven aspects of the content that has been recovered by these theologians regarding the principalities and powers. Firstly, the merging of local deity and local politics characteristic of the Near Eastern religions among and against which much Old Testament theology was developed. Secondly, the consequent acknowledgement of 'alien deities, powers other than God', in the social imaginary of the Hebrew Scriptures. This led to diverse responses in the prophets, for example, syncretism, the prohibition of idolatry, or the subordinating of these powers to God in the presentation of something like a divine council or court. Thirdly, the fallen and rebellious nature of these powers in the New Testament, in which they are identified with Empire and human rulers.

The fourth aspect of the recuperation of the language of principalities and powers McClendon underlines is that the 'conflict with and conquest of these powers' is presented as a core element of Jesus's ministry. Moreover, McClendon contends that while the New Testament epistles summarise the outcome of this conflict as God having disarmed, humiliated and triumphed over these powers in Christ (Colossians 2:15), in the gospels 'the contra-power that Jesus (and through him, God's Spirit) mounts against these is nothing less than the whole course of his obedient life'.[68] Fifthly, McClendon notes that New Testament Jewish Christians inherited from the Jewish prophetic tradition the capacity to critically assess both the powers of, or behind, the Roman superstate as well as the religious structures of their own tradition, including the Temple, priesthood and the law. At this point McClendon talks insightfully of 'powerful practice-incorporating structures' which he identifies with a range of institutions, such as, governments, transnational companies, military

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[66] McClendon, *Ethics*, 173-77.
[67] McClendon, *Ethics*, 161.
[68] McClendon, *Ethics*, 174.

bodies and institutionalised religions. He distances himself at this point from MacIntyre, who views practices as being susceptible to the acquisitiveness of institutions and comes closer to Bourdieu's understanding of habitus in which practices, customs, along with institutions, form the frame for our lives. McClendon's language resonates with Bourdieu's while maintaining a theological and apocalyptic edge. 'Powerful practices, held on course by steel bands of custom and utility and *telic* force will settle down upon us, take us up into themselves, maybe overwhelm and destroy us'.[69]

The sixth aspect of McClendon's borrowing from Ellul and Yoder is that the New Testament sees these powers as neither destroyed nor abolished, 'but dethroned… wherever Christ's victory is proclaimed'.[70] McClendon identifies here a tension for a Christian way of being in the world between the times. The 'ambiguous state' of the powers means 'they delimit and define the social morality of Jesus' followers', while the particular expression of power they exert will determine 'the crosses' that Christians in particular contexts have to bear. While these powers are ranged against human life, at the same time Christians are called to bear witness concerning the reversal achieved in the resurrection. 'That is, make it plain that these civil, military, economic, traditional, cultural, social, yes, religious and other structures are not themselves the end and meaning of life'.[71] McClendon's seventh New Testament insight into the powers is the tentative suggestion that their destiny is not to be abolished through the victory of the cross, but fully restored.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from McClendon's presentation of powerful practices. Principally, McClendon here complexifies the world and the church's relationship to it. In a good way. Theological proponents of virtue ethics emphasise the church, sometimes to the detriment of the world. The predominance of work on practices has focused on the ecclesial context, the gathered community. While this has often been criticised as sectarian, it is in

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[69] James Wm McClendon, 'Ethics for a Career' in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.* Volume 2 edited by Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 325.

[70] McClendon, *Ethics*, 175.

[71] Ibid., 176

fact motivated by a concern for mission.[72] There are two aspects of this argument. Firstly, that believers acquire the character adequate for witness in the world through participation in the worship of the Church.[73] The Church, along with other Christian institutions responds to the 'need to form actors' for God's mission in the world.[74] Secondly, theologians such as Hauerwas and Yoder argue that the church is fulfilling its mission through being the church, enacting a social ethic which bears witness to the gospel. As Yoder states the case, 'The church's responsibility to and for the world is first and always to be the church'.[75] While McClendon agrees that 'the church is not the world' he sidesteps the straightforward church-world dichotomy that haunts many postliberal theologies. In his presentation of powerful practices McClendon avoids the criticism that such theologies do not have a 'view of culture nuanced enough to capture the impact of cultural pluralism forming contemporary Christians and their congregations'.[76] He pictures Christians engaged in powerful practices, and therefore acted upon by the principalities and powers that animate them, across a range of activities from professions to leisure. McClendon also discerns the damage that can be done by ecclesial and liturgical practices; how these can be commandeered by the principalities and powers. He describes a theological dynamic wherein ecclesial practices interact with broader cultural practices, not always in a fashion that might lead us to picture the church as a counterculture, or a distinct colony. Rather, ecclesial practices may buckle in encounter with dominant practices and may facilitate forms of life which are inimical to the gospel.

The prescience of this insight can be seen in more recent theological attention to Christian practices and the virtues they are thought to engender. Lauren Winner, for example, offers a compelling supplement to virtue ethics in her book, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*.[77] Winner argues, on the basis of an understanding of human sinfulness, that Christian practices lead to malformations as well as

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[72] Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, 58-59.
[73] Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004), 62-64.
[74] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 166.
[75] Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 61.
[76] Scharen, *Public Worship*, 35.
[77] Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (London: Yale University Press, 2018).

ideal formation in character. Practices, such as the eucharist, baptism and prayer, carry 'characteristic damage' that is intrinsic to the practices themselves as historically enacted and shaped. Similarly, Willie James Jennings has traced the multiple ways in which the Christian tradition, and traditioned Christians - Christians formed through the practices and theology of the church - contributed to the development of early capitalism, imperial expansion and the slave trade. Particularly through the articulation and formation of an enabling theological anthropology: whiteness.[78]

While McClendon makes the point that participation in social practices as he has defined them is unavoidable, he suggests that such engagement can be carried out, to some extent, on the Christian's terms. Though he doesn't develop this in *Ethics*, elsewhere he advocates a threefold approach to engaging with powerful practices.[79] Firstly, practices should be met within 'a story that makes sense of our lives'. Being steeped in the gospel narrative is what enables the Christian community to discern 'what kinds of power are in conformity with the victory of the Lamb'[80] Secondly, it is possible to aim at cultivating or even reforming practices. McClendon insists that 'powerful practices as such are neither necessarily good nor necessarily evil' and can be shaped by those who are engaged in 'counter-practices' fostered by a different community. Thirdly, McClendon argues that while people engaged in careers, for example, in medicine, law or construction, will as a matter of course be immersed in associated practices, engagement in counter practices offers the possibility of both resisting the malformations of these powers and even of redirecting them. McClendon proposes the kingdom of God as an alternative powerful practice, with 'its own initiation rites, its own rules of performance, its own measures of success and failure'. In this sense, according to McClendon, the kingdom of God represents a counter-practice that can 'withstand the vast power of the practices that accept us as career makers'.[81]

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[78] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (London: Yale University Press, 2011).
[79] McClendon, 'Ethics for a Career', 324-25.
[80] McClendon*, Ethics*, 177.
[81] McClendon, 'Ethics for a Career', 325.

McClendon's language of counter-practices may seem overly optimistic in the light of this discussion on powerful practices and human vulnerability. It is an area that he did not develop in any depth, though others have done so profitably. James K.A. Smith views the historic liturgy of the Church as something akin to McClendon's notion of a counter-practice.[82] Ryan Andrew Newson, a Baptist writing in the context of the USA, expands McClendon's brief account of counter-practices. He states that within the ecclesial turn 'there is a tendency to endorse a subtle prioritisation whereby a focus on church practices means one needs to get everything settled within one's ecclesial borders first, and only then move to engagement with others'.[83] For Newson, counter-practices are those practices that are instilled in church but require the presence of others from outside the church for their implementation, or at the least their extension. He presents them as functioning in tension with wider powerful practices in such a way that the Christian's identity is formed by both practices and counter-practices. He makes the case for the baptist counter-practice of communal discernment, rooted in patient receptivity, attention to the local, and confrontation, which enables baptists to bring a unique contribution to forms of local democracy.[84] Given this interaction between counter-practices and wider power practices, McClendon is realistic when he observes that 'confronting a world of powerful practices . . . requires almost infinite adjustments, distinctions, and gradations'. Here he conjures a piecemeal approach to the powers, in which cracks are sought and angles are worked in order to witness to, and live lives that resonate with, a different power. This envisaging of small scale practices ranged in resistance to overbearing powers anticipates, in fragmentary form, Michel de Certeau's bricolage of tactics employed by the disempowered against the overarching power of strategy and strategy-makers.[85] McClendon's presentation of counter-practices chimes with the call to discipleship that animates the baptist vision that he promotes, as it resonates with his insightful judgement that the 'counter-power' with which Jesus assaulted the powers, was 'nothing less than the whole course of his

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[82] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 155ff.
[83] Ryan Andrew Newson, *Radical Friendship: The Politics of Communal Discernment* (Fortress, 2017), 140.
[84] Newson, *Radical Friendship*, 145-160.
[85] Michel de. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Edited by Steven F. Rendall, translated by Steven F. Rendall, (London: University of California Press, 2011).

obedient life'. His description of counter-practices, within the broader analysis of powerful practices, has the potential to revive flagging interest in dissent among Baptists, and perhaps separatism among baptists.[86] The notion that communities of faith engage with the wider society, to some extent according to their own narrative and the practices it engenders, leads to particular forms of engagement. Newson's development of McClendon's work suggests that such engagement will seek collaboration with like-minded others outside the church. McClendon's discussion of principalities and powers helps clarify that such engagement is aimed at influencing and changing the direction of these powers. The focus on the full range of powerful practices also, critically for a post-democratic context, expands the concern of dissent beyond engagement with the state and beyond traditional issues, such as religious freedom. Practices of dissent may be aimed now at concerns with other aspects of justice, including for example economic and environmental.

McClendon's presentation of powerful practices is certainly theologically rich and useful in terms of discipleship and mission. There is, though, a deficit in his reflections at this point. It is the lack of pneumatology. This is a common critique of ecclesial ethics due at least in part to its recourse to MacIntyre's outline of practices, which stresses 'human activity', 'human powers' and 'human conceptions', albeit within a collective framework.[87] Coakley notes that taking MacIntye's definition as a paradigm for reflection on ecclesial practices risks 'an account that sidelines a theology of divine interaction or cooperative grace'.[88] This lacuna may be more apparent in McClendon than in other postliberal ethicists because of his ontological attribution to practices via the biblical language powers and principalities. It is, therefore, puzzling to notice the lack of sustained discussion of how God may inhabit practices, within the world or indeed the church. Here, again, McClendon's three strand structure in *Ethics* may be problematic. In the resurrection strand he discusses, albeit briefly and without any pneumatological precision, God's agency, mediated

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[86] For the distinction between Anabaptist separatism and Baptist dissent see, John Colwell, 'In defence of Christendom', *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, Volume 298 (April 2007), 21.

[87] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175.

[88] Coakley, 'Deepening Practice', 80.

through practices. This crucial area of reflection is missing, however, within the social strand of *Ethics*.

Conclusion

James McClendon's systematic theology, set to align with the baptist vision and attuned to what he thought of as a postmodern, or perhaps late-modern, context, is a creative and compelling example of postliberal theology. It also, tellingly for a baptist theology, maps out a much-needed movement in the other direction; for those journeying beyond — or away from — conversative evangelicalism. The philosophical underpinnings of non-foundationalism appeal to many of those who are dissatisfied with propositional notions of truth. They also fit with the biblicism and localism of baptist ecclesiology. McClendon's emphasis on practices enables baptists to find in their own theological vision and form of life resources for theology. From a baptist perspective the clarity McClendon brings to the role of intentions, particularly those of the believer, within the dynamics of practice has been seen to safeguard the whole discourse from nominalism, while proposing an embodied and socially formative process that goes well beyond the decisionism he sought to undermine.

McClendon's presentation of powerful practices is, however, his most original and compelling contribution to the immense body of theological discourse on practices. The presentation of powers and principalities as the paradigm for structured and structuring practices is a necessary counterpoint — if not corrective — to McClendon's overburdening of practice with individual intent, or underselling the way practices form sensibilities and quasi-instinctual responses, with scant recourse to the will of the single practitioner. His association of practices with powers and principalities acknowledges that participation in particular practices involves being acted upon. Human being is, on this reading, vulnerable. It is to McClendon's credit that he has moved beyond a phenomenological presentation of practices, to express an apocalyptic sense of presence and threat which possibly feels even more fitting in the present global context than it did when he wrote it. It is here that McClendon has raised the stakes of discipleship and implicitly set a premium on discernment. The inescapability of engagement with powerful practices — and so

principalities and powers — as I have argued, brings to the fore issues of how Christians engage in society. McClendon stresses that 'the line between the church and the world passes right through each Christian heart'.[89] Yet Christians are called to discern and align themselves with those powers, and practices, that are 'in conformity with the victory of the Lamb.' If, however, McClendon had paired his insights on powerful practices and his suggestions about counter-practices with a pneumatology that pictured the openness of humanity to the divine, through participation in practices deemed to be 'graced' or the means for indwelling the gospel story, he would have provided an even more dynamic and compelling presentation of practices. Such a presentation would have contributed more to thinking and practice in discipleship and mission. It would have given impetus to practices of discernment which seek where God is active in the world, so as to participate with God in God's mission.

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[89] McClendon, *Ethics*, 17.

James McClendon and the Use of Biography for Christian Ethics

Gale Richards

Abstract: In a context of some of today's churches being accused of being slow to respond to social concerns such as modern slavery, this article examines the potential for developing James McClendon's use of biography as a corrective for Christian ethics.

Key words: McClendon, Biography, Christian ethics

Introduction

> We Christians are too accustomed to believe that ethics has nothing to do with our bodies, their environment, our mutual needs, our delights and horrors, our organic selfhood in context . . . There is a long history of ascetic dualism in both Catholic and Protestant thought.[1]

These words from James McClendon's *Ethics* volume of his systematic theology, provided the rationale for McClendon seeking to utilise biographies as a corrective, for the task of Christian ethics. This embodied ethics advocated by McClendon, forms part of an overarching approach to what he described later in the *Ethics* volume as a three-stranded narrative ethics. The three strands being, 'embodied selfhood,' the 'communal or social strand,' and 'resurrection strand.'[2]

McClendon's original call back in the 1980s for a more embodied ethics still seems relevant today. He was concerned that ethics was being seen by far too many Christians as moral decision-making in relation to a series of dilemmas, as opposed to being concerned with

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[1] James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Systematic Theology, Volume 1, Ethics* (Rev. Ed., Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012 [2002]), 85.
[2] McClendon, *Ethics,* 329-30.

how the lives of human beings are meant to connect to the ongoing story of God's mission. Today, churches stand accused of focusing on 'religious affairs, at the expense of social concerns.'[3] This is in the context of churches being seen as slow to respond to the current, horrific, systemic and global problem of modern slavery and human trafficking. The churches' slumber seemingly rooted in a failure to see addressing such systemic human suffering as core to God's mission and therefore core to role of the Church.

It might also be argued that the slumber of these churches has its roots in the legacy of Neo-Platonic dualism philosophies that influenced both the early Church, and the readings of Scripture that helped to justify the transatlantic slave trade.[4] At the heart of these philosophies is a clear distinction between sacred and secular spheres and the suggestion that the Church should only be concerned with the sacred sphere. The ongoing legacy of these philosophies can be seen in current examples of Christians not seeing it as problematic to routinely mistreat and exploit human beings, because they believe the substance of their faith is worshipping God in Sunday services, and spending time in daily prayer and Bible study.[5]

In light of these ongoing challenges, it seems appropriate to consider afresh the potential usefulness of employing biography for Christian ethics as advocated by McClendon in his *Ethics* volume.

For the purposes of this article, the criteria for assessing the usefulness of McClendon's model of biography as a corrective for the task of Christian ethics will be his decisions as to: selecting biographies; what details to include (or exclude) within them; and employing these biographies in the three strands of his narrative ethics.

Selecting Biographies

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[3] Kang-San Tan, 'Awakening Our Slumber: A Missiological Response to Global Modern Slavery' in *Slavery-free communities – Emerging Theologies and Faith Responses to Modern Slavery* edited by Dan Pratt (London: SCM, 2021), 239.

[4] See Anthony G. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit – A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 48.

[5] See Gale Richards, 'Learning from the Church's Role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Responding to the Exploitation and Trafficking of People Today' in *Slavery-free Communities*, 91-92.

At the time of writing *Ethics* McClendon already had a track record of using biography for theology. In his earlier book *Biography as Theology – how life stories can remake today's theology*, he in part focused on analysing striking Christians lives, in relation to the convictions that underpinned their understandings of what the Church should teach on atonement. He argued:

> there appears from time to time singular or striking lives, the lives of persons who embody the conviction of the community, but in a new way; who share the vision of the community, but with new scope or power; who exhibit the style of the community, but with significant differences. It is plain that the example of these lives may serve to disclose and perhaps correct or enlarge the community's moral vision . . . Such lives, by their very attractiveness or beauty, may serve as data for a Christian thinker.[6]

In *Biography as Theology*, his chosen examples of striking Christian lives were Dag Hammarskjöld, Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Jordan, and Charles Ives, whose actions had all inspired ethical attitudes and actions in others. He identified their actions as underpinned by dominant images woven through their lives that shaped their vision of God. Further, this vision of God he argued had been formed in the context of church communities. He found that when their actions were brought into interaction with the teaching on the doctrine of atonement of their day, they had revealed the need for that teaching to be modified.

In the case of one of those figures Martin Luther King Jr., McClendon demonstrated how King's life showed, in King's times, a need for teaching on the doctrine of atonement to 'give room for a broader human scope than Christians have generally allowed, breaking down the lines of creed, tribe, races, caste and class.'[7] McClendon later described how King's life helped enable such changes in teaching. In Chapter 1 of the *Doctrine* volume of his systematic theology, King is

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[6] James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Biography as Theology – How life stories can remake today's theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022 [1990]), 22.
[7] McClendon, *Biography as Theology,* 82.

described as akin to that of a '20th century Father.'[8] His stated illustration of King's worthiness of this status was King's protest against the Vietnam war, growing directly from his role as a public and practical teacher of Christian doctrine.

In *Ethics*, McClendon again examined striking lives as data for Christian thinkers, but now with a focus on their convictions in relation to how the Church should live. In this instance he focused on the 'striking' lives of Sarah Pierpont Edwards, Jonathan Edwards, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day. He did not afford as much detail to the lives of these four figures, as he did to the lives he focused on in *Biography as Theology*. He also opted to use particular biographies to illustrate particular strands of his narrative ethics and none to fully illustrate all three — Sarah and Jonathan's biographies to illustrate embodied selfhood strand, Dietrich Bonhoeffer the community or social strand, and Dorothy Day the resurrection strand.

This more limited use of biographies in *Ethics* was presumably in part due to the constraints of seeking to fit so much material into what is a dense volume of his systematic theology. Whatever his reasoning the ramifications of this are particularly evident in his use of the biographies of Sarah and Jonathan. Accordingly, in this paper greater attention is paid to his use of Sarah and Jonathan's biographies, to show the potential weaknesses of the model. Lesser references are made to how McClendon utilises the biographies of Bonhoeffer and Day, to point to how the weaknesses in his uses of Sarah and Jonathan's biographies might have been mitigated.

Employing biographies for the strands of narrative ethics

McClendon in utilising the life stories of Sarah Pierpont Edwards (1710-58) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) to illustrate the embodied selfhood strand of his narrative ethics, set out by saying that 'in their integrity and compelling power will not just illustrate, but test and verify (or by their absence or failure will falsify) the set of religious convictions they embody.'[9] He explained further that they had 'a fully

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[8] James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Systematic Theology, Volume II, Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 53-54.
[9] McClendon, *Ethics*, 120.

embodied life together, rich in erotic passion, rich in mutual love, 'rich' too in the pain and death that are part of life itself.'[10]

He also highlighted how Sarah and Jonathan themselves emphasised a necessary connection between religious thought and feelings in actual daily conduct. Sarah did this in her autobiography and Jonathan both in his autobiography and wider portfolio of works.

McClendon then identified three key themes from their lives for analysis – an uncommon union, the pastor's wife converted (story of Sarah's maturing), and the convergence of theory and life.

The inspiring nature of their uncommon union McClendon described as Jonathan being born in a rural village and being an introvert, and Sarah being born in a more refined area and being an extrovert. Thus, he argued their openness to come together from such contrasting social backgrounds in itself was striking and reflected their convictions of how the Church should live.

Drawing on Sarah's own narrative of her life, McClendon used the term pastor's wife converted, to describe the 'inspiring' changes in the way she dealt with Jonathan being away, the criticism the parish levelled against her and her husband, and her husband Jonathan's own criticism of her. McClendon referenced the analysis William James, a psychologist, offered on her narrative. He drew out of this aspect of her life story an experience of God's presence, as she embodied a conviction to love all, including her enemies as she dealt with parish criticism.

McClendon also made reference to Elisabeth Dodd's analysis of Sarah's narrative. Dodd suggested Sarah went to breaking point and back, as she sought to care for a household when left alone by Jonathan. McClendon then drew on Jonathan's interpretation of his wife's life story, as one of love of God and humankind. Her love being pure benevolence, pure good will and virtue. Jonathan's view was that in her collapse, God had given her a new or renewed disposition to embody a conviction to love people even in the midst of struggle and criticism. That represented a shift from 'secondary virtue (or bounded

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[10] McClendon, *Ethics*, 120.

love) to true virtue (or the love that comes from and returns to God).'[11]

McClendon referred to the final of the three themes for analysis in their lives — convergence of theory and life — in relation to Jonathan's written reflections on a similar experience to Sarah's 'episode' he had had many years earlier. McClendon summarised what Jonathan wrote as he reflected on a time of ministry which included being dismissed from his congregation for his view of a closed communion table. This summary included 'love should be evident to us in those circumstances in which his projects and purposes run contrary to your own.'[12]

McClendon's suggestion was that not only did Jonathan and Sarah live out the love Jonathan referred to, but the concept of love was an organising principle in Jonathan's writing, not just about his life with Sarah or his ministry experiences, but in his theoretical writing too. Jonathan was clear in his writing that this 'love is necessarily . . . a relational term, not a bare sentiment or feeling.'[13]

In using Sarah and Jonathan's biographies to demonstrate an embodied conviction of love of all, McClendon failed to situate them within their wider socio-political context. Yet, it is the inclusion of a Christian figure's wider socio-political context and how they navigate it, which enables the reader to see their actions as striking and their lives particularly worthy of providing data for Christian thinkers (e.g. Martin Luther King Jr.'s actions in the wider context of the civil rights movement in *Biography as Theology*).

When Sarah and Jonathan's home life is placed in its wider socio-political context, and consideration is given to how they navigate that, as a white man and white woman, their lives appear less inspirational. Notably, Jonathan's description of Sarah's 'collapse' does not seem to emphasise the challenges of giving birth, the impact that has on a woman's body, and the challenges women faced in those times of raising children. Accordingly, Jonathan does not appear to emphasise

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[11] McClendon, *Ethics*, 134.
[12] McClendon, *Ethics*, 134.
[13] McClendon, *Ethics*, 137.

his responsibility for examining the potential impact of his actions on her 'collapse' – such as his times of absence from the home as he focuses on his ministry and the pressures that might have placed on her. Added to this, a part of Sarah and Jonathan's home life together included owning and overseeing Black people as slaves, which is something McClendon failed to reference. Furthermore, Jonathan Edwards was not only a slaveholder but is recorded as defending the right of slaveholding.[14]

This is not the first time in his use of biographies that it can be argued McClendon failed to reference the shortcomings of a person's actions. In the case of MLK Jr., he failed to highlight the claims of male chauvinism levelled against King, in relation to him failing to give space or recognition to women involved in the civil rights movement.[15] However, in the case of McClendon's use of King's life story to illustrate the need for developments in teaching on the doctrine of atonement — to give greater room for breaking down the lines of creed, tribe, races, caste and class — his failure to reference the chauvinistic shortcoming in King's life does not substantially undermine his argument. It does however, alert the reader to the need to search out accounts of the women who might potentially share the credit for some of the thinking and action King has largely been credited with.

In contrast, McClendon's use of Sarah and Jonathan's life story centred on utilising their home life as a basis for arguing that they embodied the conviction of love of all, as an example of how the church should live. Consequently, if Jonathan's treatment of Sarah, and their reasoning for, and their practice of owning Black people as slaves was exceptional, and inspirational in some way for those times, then that would need to be evidenced. This would have been the means by which McClendon could have justified their home life together being particularly striking and worthy of providing data for Christians for ethical thinking and action.

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[14] See K. P. Minkema, 'Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery', *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002), 23-59 .
[15] See James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America – A Dream or a Nightmare* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 278.

However, it is difficult to see how Jonathan's blinded view of his wife's embodied experiences, and their collective blinded view of the embodied experiences of the Black people they owned as slaves, could be said to stand the test of time, to enable their life together per se, to still be illustratively inspirational.

This remains the case even when considering the significance of John Sailant's argument that Jonathan Edwards's awakening to the unethical thinking and actions of English settlers towards 'Native Americans'. Sailant argues Edwards's experience among 'Native Americans' probably led him into a new interpretation of Psalm 82 and John 10:30–8. An interpretation that saw the false judgments or mistreatment of the poor and lowly by the princes of Israel in Psalm 82, as demonstrating why Christ needed to come to show humanity the right way to live. This Sailant argues was the beginning of Edwards laying the foundations for a belief that would likely have led him (as it later led others) to an understanding that it was not God's desire for Israel or Christ's Church to enslave people.[16]

Even if Sailant's projected shift in Jonathan Edwards thinking is accepted as indicative of a shift Edwards would have made away from the enslavement of Black people, it is not enough to justify McClendon's use of the Edwards's home life, as an example of an embodied conviction of love of all, as a demonstration of how the Church should live.

For in owning slaves, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards were engaging in a societal system that treated millions of Black bodies as chattel, and resulted in indescribable harm being done to them and at times their premature deaths. This would not seem to be in line with McClendon's stated aim of utilising biography to correct an apparent approach to ethics that had nothing to do with human bodies. In McClendon's words: 'We cannot be Christians in soul while remaining pagans in body; rather baptism is baptism of our bodies; at the Lord's

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[16] See John Sailant, 'Ministry to the Bound and Enslaved', in *The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* edited by D.A Sweeney and J. Stievermann, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)

table we feed body and soul alike and at once; it is with physically, fleshly ears that we hear — the preached word of God.'[17]

This lack of attention to the treatment of Black bodies in his choice of striking lives is particularly surprising because of McClendon's statement earlier in the *Ethics* volume, that he drew his inspiration from 'Black religion,' for his call for an embodied narrative ethics. Black American Christian life, he argued had its roots in both African traditional religion and in Christian history, and it made it distinctive. Religions in West Africa where the enslaved came from he argued have a 'life-affirming' focus, and an implicit focus on bodily life as correlated to liberty. Black religion he continued had always been 'embodied religion,' that is not about spiritual existence apart from bodily life. Further, Black church understanding of the gospel is in narrative form, and understands through the Jesus story, what they endured such as enslavement, was not meaningless but echoed the Jesus story of crucifixion and suffering.[18]

Had McClendon tested the suitability of using Sarah and Jonathan's life together as an example, in light of the second 'community or social strand' of his narrative ethics, these oversights perhaps would have been avoided. For the focus of that second strand is church community, and its narrative tradition and practices, inclusive of the dominant images, that shape their vision of God, and point to the way of Christ.

This is seen in the way in which McClendon used Dietrich Bonhoeffer's biography to illustrate the community or social strand of his narrative ethics. In doing so he showed how Bonhoeffer's conviction to the act of peace-making, in the midst of the Nazi regime in Germany was shaped by communal practices. This included working in an underground seminary using the Sermon on the Mount inclusive of its reference to loving your enemy, as a pattern for focusing on a disciplined routine of daily meditation and prayer. Additionally, members of the seminary confessed sins to each other in preparation for taking communion, as part of their general watching

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[17] McClendon, *Ethics* p.95
[18] McClendon, *Ethics*, 86-90.

over and caring for each other. McClendon also documented how as the numbers committed to such communal practices diminished rather than grew, Bonhoeffer's conviction to non-violent peace-making also waivered.

Attention to this second strand in relation to Sarah and Jonathan's life stories could potentially have led to questions such as — How was the church community Sarah and Jonathan belonged to treating women and Black people's felt experiences? Was their church community telling exhausted nursing mums to not expect the presence of their husbands or help from them? Was their church community telling Black people to be obedient to their slave masters? Were Sarah and Jonathan doing anything to counter these messages? Were there other churches that were offering an alternative view at that time?

In relation to that latter point of alternative Christian ethical thinking and action that was taking place in other churches, Katie Cannon offers some insights from the Black church:

> The Black woman's daring act of remaking her lost innocence into invisible dignity, her never-practiced delicacy into quiet grace, and her forced responsibility into unshouted courage . . . Hidden from the eyes of slavemasters, Black women and men developed extensive religious life of their own. Utilizing West African religious concepts in a new and totally different context and syncretistically blending them with orthodox, colonial Christianity, the slaves made Christianity truly their own.[19]

The fact that McClendon did not reference the significance of the mistreatment of women and Black people that features in Sarah and Jonathan's life stories, potentially also says something about the significance of his social location, as a white man. A location that apparently blinded him to the significance of these issues hindering many from drawing inspiration from Sarah and Jonathan's biographies, in the late twentieth century context he was writing in, and beyond.

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[19] K.G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics,* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006 [1988]), 17.

Nevertheless, the third strand of McClendon's narrative ethics is 'resurrection' and provides a framework for seeing how the mistreatment of women and Black people in different circumstances, might not have hindered the use of Sarah and Jonathan's biographies. The resurrection strand accounts for the possibility of an individual's ethical thinking and action being transformed. It recognises that followers of the way of Christ, since the days of the New Testament have seen the resurrection light and changed course.

This is seen in the way McClendon utilised the biography of Dorothy Day to illustrate the resurrection strand of his narrative ethics, to show how her conviction to peace-making grew, and her life changed course, as she 'put on Christ.' That is, she actively sought to live out the way of Christ, even loving your enemy, in accordance with teachings of the Sermon of the Mount. This was something advocated in the retreat movement Onesimus Lacouture she had become involved in. She continued to advocate for a peace-making approach, based on Christ's command to love your enemy in the Sermon on the Mount, even when the USA entered the Second World War.

In a much similar way, Sarah and Jonathan's biographies could still have been inspirational to so many more people, if it could have been evidenced that their life stories included an actual shift in their convictions on how the Church should live. Particularly in relation to taking women and Black people's embodied experiences more seriously.

In reflecting on McClendon's use of Sarah, Jonathan, Dietrich, and Dorothy's biographies it is apparent that the Sermon on the Mount and the call within it to love all, including your enemy, featured in all of their biographies. Yet, that call to love all within the Sermon on the Mount did not appear to shape Sarah and Jonathan's ethical thinking and action in relation to the enslavement of Black people. Perhaps this failure on the part of Sarah and Jonathan provides further clues as to what might potentially strengthen the choice of biographies to inspire ethical thinking and action. Namely, does the nature of God's love that is to be shared (even with enemies) need to be understood from the point of view of the felt experiences of those on the margins of society? Glen Stassen's work on the common factors identified in the

lives of what he calls 'heroes of the faith' provides a helpful point of reference on this issue.

Embodied ethics from the margins

Stassen focused on 'heroes of the faith' that publicly did what was right even though it was costly in historical moments (e.g. during Nazi rule in Germany, or the civil rights movement in the USA) whilst others were being 'seduced by an unfaithful culture.'[20]

Stassen argued these 'heroes of the faith' that have passed the test of time, had focused on 'thickly exegeting Jesus,' by looking at Jesus' ministry and teaching (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount) and actively seeking to follow it, not seeing it as an impossible ideal.[21] They lived in public ways that 'moves society in a direction towards ethics of Jesus' way.' This involved them repenting themselves (and calling for others to repent) of engagement in the 'unfaithful ideology' underpinning the unfaithful culture, and advocating specific community practices that would instead help others embody the ethics of Jesus' way. Examples of such practices he pointed to are rejecting the Ayran clause that excluded Jews from churches, providing safe havens for Jews fleeing the Nazi regime, and leading non-violent resistance in the civil rights movement in the USA.[22]

In Stassen's list of 'heroes of the faith' he named both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day. Their lives for him revealed a commitment to an embodied theology that took Jesus' ministry and teaching seriously, and their own and others felt experiences of living on the margins of society.

It might also be argued that Bonhoeffer and Day engaged in what might now be termed a form of liberation theology. An approach to theology that focuses on rightly understanding the Bible as dependent

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[20] Glen H. Stassen, 'Testing Ethical Method in the Laboratory of History' in *Justice and the Way of Jesus – Christian Ethics and the Incarnational Discipleship of Glen Stassen* edited by David P. Gushee and Reggie L. Williams, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), x.

[21] See here also Glen H. Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

[22] Stassen, 'Testing Ethical Method in the Laboratory of History', xiii–xxii.

on reading it from the perspective of the marginalised and oppressed. It is also concerned with shining a light on and calling for changes to social, economic, and political structures that sustain the oppression and marginalisation. In this way it recognises the role of the oppressed and marginalised in participating in their own liberation from below.

At the time of McClendon writing his systematic theology, liberation theology was in the early stages of being recognised within academic disciplines. Its formal emergence is often traced back to a twentieth century movement in Latin America, and the writing of the theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. His book, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) is seen as the seminal text of that movement. Its formal emergence may also additionally be traced back to the twentieth century civil rights movement in the USA, and the writings of the Black theologian James Cone — *Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). In the twenty-first century liberation theology as an academic discipline has expanded, and it is perhaps more accurate to speak of liberative theologies or theologies of liberation. The list might now include Black, feminist, womanist, postcolonial, disability, LGBT+ (Queer) amongst other forms. The growing field of liberative theologies perhaps gives credence to an argument that understanding the nature of God's love that is to be shared (even with enemies) requires giving serious attention to the point of view of those on the margins of society and their felt experiences.

Given McClendon's Baptist background it is notable that McClendon did not discern what Richard Kidd suggests as intrinsic themes within a Baptist way of being church that seems to correlate with theologies of liberation. In this regard in referring to the early founding Baptist figures, Kidd argues that: 'Baptist parents in the faith, as they dialogued with their inherited context, became bold deconstructors of the highly inappropriate power structures which they found in a hierarchical church.'[23]

Kidd then continues to identify themes under five headings, Scripture, Community, Mission (which teams up with Liberty), Discipleship and

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[23] Richard J. Kidd, 'Baptists and theologies of liberation' in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* edited by Paul S. Fiddes, (Oxford: Whitley, 2000), 46.

Conversion. He unpacks these themes as Baptists' ways of reading the Scriptures in local community which allowed them to 'deconstruct the powers-that-be in the name of the gospel of Christ; operating in locally contextualized communities that gave them the potential for facilitating 'wide ranging prophetic initiatives;' having a holistic vision of mission that is liberation focused by virtue of Baptists' commitment to religious liberty for all; seeing martyrdom as 'sets the shape and standard, the bottom-line, for discipleship' and sets the ultimate question for faith — 'What would you die for?' — which related to potentially dying in the pursuit of liberation; and taking seriously the need to actively take up the commitment to follow the way of Christ (conversion) inclusive of the pursuit of liberation.

A question that now remains having drawn insights from the writing of Cannon, Stassen, and Kidd: is McClendon's call decades ago for a more embodied ethics using biography worthy of further attention?

Conclusion

The potential for the use of biography for theology is evident in McClendon's earlier use of biography for reshaping doctrine. That potential for biography to be a helpful tool specifically for the task of Christian ethics is arguably also evident to a more limited degree within the volume of *Ethics*. It is clear that for this potential in *Ethics* to be more fully realised it will require a careful selection and use of the biographies that provide the appropriate data for Christian ethical thinking and action. Giving priority to biographies of people that are committed to an embodied theology that takes seriously the point of view and felt experiences of those oppressed and on the margins of society will likely be an important part of that task. As will the need for those selecting the biographies to be used, to engage in effective reflexivity. This is to enable them to take into account the potential for their social location to blind them from aspects of the life they are selecting not taking equally seriously the felt experiences of all God's people. It will also be impossible to find any human lives that have been lived perfectly, and so there should be no expectation to find any. However, there should be an expectation to uncover shifts in the moral convictions that underpin an individual's ethical thinking and action, as part of the course of their journey of seeking to follow the way of the resurrection light of Christ. Additionally, efforts should be

made to name the areas within the selected person's life story where their actions have been regrettable, at the same time demonstrating how their life overall might still been seen as a significant source of inspiration at particular moments of time.

It will also be important to situate the selected person's life story within the narrative tradition and practices of the communities that have shaped the individual's ethical thinking and action for good or bad. For as Sarah Shin has argued it may be helpful to find and remedy the 'infection' within institutional practices that may have shaped or been shaped by the regrettable actions within a person's life story. She illustrates this point as she focuses on the influential theologians Karl Barth, and John H. Yoder, accused of engaging in illicit extra-marital affairs (Barth) or the sexual harassment of women (Yoder). In light of this, she argues for a need to closely examine both their writing on gender and marriage, and the institutional practices that may have influenced Barth's and Yoder's regrettable actions.[24]

Conversely, it could be argued that where there is inspirational ethical thinking and action within a person's life story, there is scope to highlight institutional practices that appear to have helped shape that. This shows the potential scope for reshaping community practices, to help reshape people's moral convictions (ethics), in relation to things like the current challenges of churches slow responses to modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation.

It should also be acknowledged that twenty-first century resources such as my own *Text and Story* have been developed out of a conviction that biographies of striking Christian figures can and have encouraged amongst other things right ethical thinking and action. *Text and Story* focused on five key historical Black Baptist leaders (Martin Luther King Jr., Mojola Agbebi, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Sam Sharpe, and Peter Thomas Stanford) that in experiencing social marginalisation were inspired by particular biblical texts, to help bring about ground-breaking social changes in places such as the Caribbean, West Africa, North America, and Britain. The resource encourages study groups (both youth and adult) in a context of worship (i.e. use of

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[24] Sarah Shin, 'The Challenge of Biography: Reading Theologians in Light of their Breached Sexual Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35.3 (2022): 584–606.

a prayer or songs relevant to the context of the historical figure), to firstly study and reflect on the positive aspects of the life stories of these five figures and the biblical texts that inspired their actions. Then secondly, to consider how they themselves might also play their own role in transforming society, today.[25] The resource is admittedly limited in scope as it does not address the regrettable actions in the lives of the five figures, and offers a limited analysis of the biblical texts that inspired the actions of the five figures.

Nevertheless, might it be time for more Christians to acknowledge and further develop the potential McClendon saw decades ago for using biography for Christian ethics? Might there also be a place in such work to employ Michael Sciretti's suggestions to use resources in worship services (e.g. prayers and reflections as meditations) that have been developed or written by key Christian figures, who are individuals seen as 'embodiments of God's love' in certain moments? This would be akin to individuals that might in some Church traditions referred to as 'Saints.'[26] Such resources may well also serve as helpful aids in inspiring ethical thinking and action.

Note on Contributor

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[25] Gale Richards, *Text and Story: Prophets for their time and ours* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, 2014).

[26] Michael D. Sciretti, 'The Christian Year: Practicing the High Priesthood of Believers' in *Gathering Together: Baptists at Work in Worship* edited by Eds. Rodney W. Kennedy and Derek Hatch (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 34-37.

All the Way from America: James McClendon and Theological Reflection

Julian R. Gotobed

Abstract: Contemporary ministerial formation in Britain affords a central place to theological reflection. This article argues that the practice of theological reflection still engages with Christian doctrine in limited ways. James McClendon represents a potential resource to address the doctrinal deficit in the practice of theological reflection. McClendon's concepts of convictions and theology as 'convictional discourse' are especially useful in enabling students and seasoned practitioners of theological reflection to identify theological themes present in the lived experience of church and ministry, and to place theological themes in conversation with the Christian doctrinal tradition. The article concludes with an outline of a study day designed to help students begin to utilise McClendon's concepts in the practice of theological reflection.

Key Words: McClendon, convictions, theological reflection

Introduction

This article considers the nature of theological education for men and women preparing to be priests, ministers, and pastors in Christian denominations in Britain today with reference to a central feature in many programmes: theological reflection. Theological reflection seeks to place experience and the practices of the church[1] in dialogue with Christian tradition, for example, the Bible and/or Christian doctrine, to enable fidelity to the Gospel in belief and practice. In 2005, when theological reflection constituted an emerging, almost tentative, feature of theological curricula in Britain, Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward observed:

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[1] Practices of the church includes corporate practices such as worship and mission, but also extends to the personal practice and agency of those called to recognised leadership as priests, pastors, and ministers.

Theological reflection is often weak in its use of traditional Christians sources … The analysis of local contexts and socio-economic factors, which theological reflection frequently requires, is often more accomplished than engagement with Church history, doctrine and Bible. This is because patterns of theological reflection are often divorced from the study of systematics/historical/biblical disciplines on the curriculum of theological colleges, courses and seminaries.[2]

In 2022, more than a decade and a half later, theological reflection now occupies a central position in many programmes of theological education.[3] My experience of teaching and assessing theological reflection in the period 2011-2021[4] is that students do better analysing the particularities of a context, the human dynamics at play, than drawing upon theological resources to assist in thinking theologically about lived experience and practice. Furthermore, students, in my experience, are more likely to attempt to connect experience and practices with the Bible than Christian doctrine. The paucity of engagement with Christian doctrine is attributable to three factors. First, a continuing disconnect in academic circles between practical theology and the 'classic' disciplines of theology already noted,[5] which inhibits constructive interaction across theological disciplines.[6] Second,

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[2] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Francis Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 7.

[3] See below: **University Validated Programmes Incorporating Theological Reflection**. Nigel Wright, former principal of Spurgeon's College, London, while acknowledging the appropriateness of broadening the theological curricular wonders if, 'we now allow insufficient time to specifically biblical and theological studies and are producing ministers whose theological abilities are superficial and thin rather than robust and profound.' Nigel G. Wright, "Theology and Ministerial Formation in the Bristol and Baptist Traditions," *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* 5 (2022), 33.

[4] In the last decade I have taught and/or examined across programmes validated by five different universities.

[5] My conviction that it is important for theological reflection to engage with Christian doctrine is longstanding. I studied for a PhD in Practical Theology at Boston University School of Theology in the USA in the early 2000s. Most of my contemporaries chose minor concentrations (a required feature of the programme) in the 'arts of ministry' such as homiletics, liturgy, or pastoral care. However, I opted for Systematic Theology.

[6] A Cambridge Theological Federation Staff Development Session in 2021-22 explored how lecturers in biblical studies and Christian doctrine might introduce theological

students are likely to possess a greater familiarity with the Bible than Christian doctrine.[7] Third, most of the commonly used approaches to theological reflection tend not to provide a framework to (a) identify Christian beliefs in experience or practices and (b) place them in dialogue with Christian doctrine.[8]

This article sets out to do four things. First, outline the place of theological reflection in ministerial formation in Britain at this present moment in time. Second, argue theological reflection is a practice partially realised, especially with reference to Christian doctrine. Third, propose that James McClendon, a Baptist theologian, offers resources to redress the neglect of Christian doctrine in theological reflection.[9] Fourth, illustrate how McClendon's concepts of convictions and theology as convictional discourse[10] can be introduced to students to enable them to engage Christian doctrine in theological reflection.

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reflection into these 'classic' disciplines. This session illustrated the inherited disconnect between practical theology and 'classic' disciplines. It also enabled constructive dialogue across discrete subject areas, which requires ongoing attention.

[7] Doctrine is never wholly absent as a factor in thinking about theological reflection or practising theological reflection. Pete Ward recognises how doctrine informs Christian identity along with experience, and that deploying theological methods in the messiness of life is complex. Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 3-5. He is correct, but his point does not detract from the observation that students incline to the Bible as the main source in Christian tradition.

[8] Some exponents of theological reflection do make space for doctrine. Killen and De Beer 'use the questions behind classic Christian themes [i.e., doctrines] to correlate data from sources, we gather the perspectives on that theme from each source.' Patricia O'Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 135. Helen Cameron and colleagues advocate a typology to categorise different kinds of theology in 'The Four Voices of Theology': Normative Theology ('Scripture, The Creeds, Official church teaching, Liturgies'), Espoused Theology ('The theology embedded within a *group's articulation of its beliefs*'), Formal Theology ('The theology of theologians, Dialogue with other disciplines'), and Operant Theology ('The theology embedded within *the actual practices of a group*'). Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), 53-56.

[9] This paper is, in part, an extension of my doctoral research. Julian R. Gotobed, "Living With Jesus: Practical Christologies in Two Boston American Baptist Churches" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2010).

[10] I describe McClendon's approach to theology as 'convictional discourse' in my PhD dissertation. See: Gotobed, "Living with Jesus," 139-140.

1. Theological Education in the 2020s: Ministerial Formation as a Multi-Dimensional Process

Christian denominations in Britain today provide theological education for priests, ministers and pastors[11] to prepare men and women for Christian ministry, that is, service rendered to God and to others.[12] Theological education as preparation for Christian ministry in Britain in the 2020s is commonly conceived as a multi-dimensional process of formation for ministry. The language of 'formation', adopted widely across denominations,[13] to describe theological education for priests, ministers, and pastors[14] points to a holistic approach to equipping students for Christian ministry:

> Formation signifies the shaping of the whole of life to the goal or end of godly and fruitful ministry, with character and spirituality as important as the acquisition of skills for the competent undertaking of the tasks of ministry, and the

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[11] For detailed discussions about the nature and history of theological education see Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) and Jose L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015). For a re-imagined approach to theological education see: Joshua T. Searle, *Theology After Christendom: Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

[12] In this paper 'ministry' embraces lay and ordained ministries and refers primarily to human agency, but recognises a larger context of divine agency. 'Ministry' is a response to the call of God, made possible by participation in the crucified and risen Jesus, and enabled by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. See: Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

[13] Ministry Division, *Formation for Ministry Within a Learning Church - Summary: The Structure and Funding of Ordination Training* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 1-4; Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Ignite Report*, (Didcot: BUGB, 2015), 36-46; David Heywood, *Reimaging Ministerial Formation* (London: SCM, 2021), ix-xvii; Anthony Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2021), 46-54.

[14] This language is applied to candidates preparing for pastorates and parish roles in so-called 'inherited church' or 'traditional church' (i.e., historic patterns of church), but also to candidates preparing for Pioneer Ministry in Fresh Expressions and Church Planting contexts (i.e., new patterns of Christian community and missional initiatives intended to engage people unfamiliar with or alienated by historic patterns of church). For example, the Church of England has formation criteria for candidates preparing for Parish Ministry and designated Pioneer Ministry: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/formation_criteria_for_ordained_ministry.pdf (accessed: 13/06/22).

> growth in understanding of fields of knowledge appropriate for ministry (such as theology, biblical studies, pastoral psychology, and missiology) if not more.[15]

A range of methods in teaching and learning is required to engage adequately with the scope and complexity of such an educational task:

> The shaping of such a life requires multiple modes of pedagogy, and not just the traditional lecture hall delivery of knowledge or the field placement practice of ministerial roles, such as preaching and pastoral visitation. There is still plenty of room for the passing on of knowledge through a lecture, seminar or private study, but to this default mode of delivery of formation should be added apprenticeship, mentoring, supervision of practice and awareness of the great significance in the personal journey of faith and growth in spirituality.[16]

The Shape of Ministerial Formation in Britain Today

Students in ministerial formation in Britain today learn through academic programmes validated by British Universities, in-house college courses, community worship and fellowship, and field experience through long-term attachments and short specialist placements. Ministerial formation typically aims to help students develop in four key areas: first, 'classic' theological subject areas such as biblical studies, Christian doctrine and church history; second, the practices of ministry (e.g., preaching, administration, pastoral care, evangelism, church planting and leading worship); third, character and growth in spirituality through personal disciplines and participation in Christian community and corporate worship;[17] fourth, an ability to

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[15] Paul Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), ix.

[16] Goodliff, *Shaped for Service*, ix.

[17] This element is particularly the case for students in residential colleges. It presupposes encounter with God.

reflect theologically upon experience[18] and the practices of the church.[19]

University Validated Programmes Incorporating Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is now routinely included in academic programmes of theology designed to equip students for Christian ministry. Examples from several denominations illustrate the point. The Church of England requires ordinands to develop skill and competence in the practice of theological reflection. Anglican theological colleges (Theological Education Institutes or TEIs) teach modules in theological reflection at undergraduate[20] and post graduate[21] levels under the umbrella of the Common Awards suite of programmes validated by the University of Durham.[22] Some Anglican ordinands in Cambridge read for the University of Cambridge Bachelor of Theology (BTh), a programme that incorporates significant elements of theological reflection.[23] The Congregational Institute for Practical Theology, Nottingham, offers a Foundation Degree in Practical Theology validated by York St John University for

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[18] Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), 77.

[19] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat assume experience as the starting point of practical theology. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 5-6. But they focus the task of theological reflection, 'on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world' (Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 6). Swinton and Mowat explore the meaning of practice (Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 17-25).

[20] Levels 4, 5, and 6 in the National Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland: https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels .

[21] Level 7 in the National Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland: https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels .

[22] Theological Colleges from other denominations and interdenominational in scope also utilise Common Awards to prepare candidates for ministry [e.g., Bristol Baptist College: https://www.bristol-baptist.ac.uk/theological-studies/ba-degree-2/ (accessed 19/05/22) and Luther King Centre for Theology and Ministry, Manchester: https://www.lutherking.ac.uk/useful-information/validation-accreditation (accessed 19/05/22)].

[23] Papers BTh 51 Pastoral Portfolio (1st exam) and BTh 52 Pastoral Portfolio (2nd exam). See: https://www.theofed.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/bth/papers-offered/ (accessed 12/05/22).

students preparing for a variety of ministry pathways in the Congregational Federation.[24] Theological reflection is a key component in several modules. The Foundation Degree in Theology, Mission and Practice[25] at the University of Roehampton, London, created to open up access to theological education and training for church leaders from African and Caribbean Pentecostal backgrounds, similarly prioritises theological reflection.[26] William Booth College, London, delivers a BA in Pastoral Care with Psychology for Salvation Army Officers in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and Continental Europe; theological Reflection is a core element.[27] There can be no doubt that in the 2020s theological reflection is a central feature in many British university validated degree programmes created to prepare candidates for Christian ministry.[28] But what exactly do we mean by 'theological reflection'?

Theological Reflection

The practice of Christians[29] thinking about their experience and understanding of God, relating faith in Jesus Christ to new cultural contexts, and working out the implications of Christian faith for Christian life and witness has existed since the emergence of Christianity two thousand years ago.[30] As Christianity migrated from

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[24] https://www.congregational.org.uk/learning-service-ministry/fda (accessed 19/05/22).

[25] These undergraduate programmes were originally described under the nomenclature of Ministerial Theology (2007 – 2022).

[26] https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/undergraduate-courses/theology-mission-and-practice/ (accessed 12/05/22). See: David Muir, "Theological Education and Training Among British Pentecostals and Charismatics," in *Pentecostals and Charismatics in Britain: An Anthology*, ed. Joe Aldred (London: SCM, 2019), 174.

[27] http://www.sistad.org/courses/pcp.html . This programme is currently validated by the Open University. From 2022-23 Bath Spa University assumes responsibility for validating it.

[28] Theological colleges also make theological reflection central to in-house programmes of ministerial formation and student experience on attachments and placements in parishes, congregations, and chaplaincies. The focus of this article is on the place of theological reflection in university validated programmes of theology. It is often the case that experience on attachments and placements provides the 'raw material' for theological reflection modules.

[29] Christians, for the purposes of this paper, are understood to be people that follow Jesus Christ and confess him as Saviour and Lord.

[30] The New Testament bears eloquent witness to this phenomenon. See: Farley, *Theologia*, and González, *The History of Theological Education*, for historical overviews.

Israel, a small corner of the Roman empire, in the first century of the common era into the wider Mediterranean world and beyond, Christians were required to think about the meaning and practice of faith in Jesus Christ every time the Gospel crossed a new cultural boundary.[31] Thinking about how the Gospel connects with the concrete world the church inhabits is nothing new. Christians through the ages have utilized a variety of different methods with a range of different starting points to think theologically.[32] Helen Collins observes that 'theological reflection' has acquired a specific and limited meaning in the context of theology in Britain today:

> … the phrase [theological reflection] is most often associated with the theological sub discipline of practical theology and is understood particularly to refer to the processes or methods for doing practical theology that have emerged in the twentieth century.[33]

Practical theology is theology concerned with the contemporary horizon; it is interested in the life and witness of the church <u>now</u>:

> It [practical theology] specifically deals with Christian life and practice within the Church and in relation to wider society.[34]

The church and the world are frequently messy and complex. Practical theology attempts to understand the human dynamics in a present situation and think theologically about what is going on. Consequently, practical theology is interdisciplinary in nature. It draws upon non-theological disciplines such as sociology and psychology along with theological disciplines such as church history, biblical studies, historical theology and systematic theology, which grapple with the Bible and

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[31] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: SCM, 2012); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).
[32] Uche Anizor, *How to Read Theology: Engaging Doctrine Critically and Charitably* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018).
[33] Helen Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting With Scripture* (London: SCM, 2020), 9.
[34] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 1.

Christian doctrine, to inform understanding of contemporary situations and to distil insights for the church and Christian discipleship. To this end practical theology employs theological reflection to engage with the church and the world today. Theological reflection refers to the methods employed in the intentional endeavour to place experience and the practices of the church[35] in dialogue with Christian tradition, for example, the Bible and/or Christian doctrine, to enable fidelity to the Gospel in belief and practice. In this vein, Ballard and Pritchard frame the purpose of theological reflection as 'elucidating the path of Christian obedience.'[36]

Experience

The category of experience is the most common springboard for theological reflection:

> Experience is what happens to us; what occurs in which we are active or passive participants. Experience has an inner dimension – the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and hopes that we carry into and out of any situation. This inner dimension involves our response to and what we make of and do with what occurs. It accents how we experience events and situations. Experience also has an outer dimension involving the people, places, projects, and objects that surround us and with which we interact. The outer dimension accents what we experience.[37]

> **Experience**. The starting point is the present situation; the more-or-less routine existence of a given context. But there is a further element. This present is interrupted, whether from within or … from outside by events that demand a response, or uncover a tension. It is no longer possible to go on as before.[38]

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[35] Practices of the church includes corporate practices such as worship and mission, but also extends to the personal practice and agency of those called to recognised leadership as priests, pastors, and ministers.

[36] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 67.

[37] Patricia O'Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 21.

[38] Ballard, and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 77. Bold included in original.

In theological reflection practice refers to human action; it is a facet of experience. Practice in theological reflection is not conceived simply as an instrumental agency detached from a wider community or a social and historical context. Swinton and Mowat note:

> Of course, the development of forms of action which have practical outcomes that result in enabling people to do things well is not in itself an unworthy goal. However, when the *effect* of the action is understood to be the goal and end in and of itself, practices becomes separated from their historical and theological roots and begin to lose their true meaning, purpose and goal.
>
> The understanding of the term 'practice' which underpins Practical Theology is of a different nature … all human practices are historically grounded and inherently value laden. Practices such as prayer, hospitality and friendship contain their own particular theological meanings, social and theological histories, implicit and explicitly norms and moral expectations … the forms of practice that we participate in are *theory-laden*.[39]

It is common in programmes of theological education oriented to ministerial formation to pay particular attention to the student's practices of ministry and mission viewed against the backdrop of the practices of the Christian community, the church. Typically, therefore, theological reflection begins with experience, a human event, episode, or situation the student observes or participates in, or practices of the church. The starting point in experience and practices has prompted practitioners of theological reflection to critically appropriate insights, perspectives and methods from academic disciplines other than theology to better understand the human dynamics operative in a given experience or practice.[40] This development in the realm of

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[39] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 19.
[40] Recent examples include: Sarah Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan, *The Human Face of the Church: A Social Psychology and Pastoral Theology Resource for Pioneer and Traditional Ministry* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2007) and David Dadswell, *Consultancy Skills for Mission and Ministry: A Handbook* (London: SCM, 2011).

theology does not mean that Christian priests, ministers and pastors did not reflect upon experience and practices prior to the emergence in higher education and professions of formal and disciplined approaches to observing, interpreting, and reflecting upon experience and practices. Rather, initiatives in secular education and professions provided impetus and theoretical frameworks for theological educators and ministry practitioners to reflect in an intentional and rigorous manner, rather than simply occasionally or ad hoc, in relation to experience and practices in the church and its engagement with society. How do these innovations in secular contexts assist in the work of theological reflection?

The Secular Meaning of Reflection

Experiential learning has become a key feature in contemporary approaches to learning in the English speaking world. Reflection is primarily about how human beings learn from practice,[41] especially specialised activity associated with professions[42] such as teaching, medicine, social work, business, and, increasingly, Christian ministry.[43]

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[41] The work of David Kolb, an American educator has been very influential across professions. Theological reflection has appropriated insights from his action-reflection learning cycle. See: David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984).

[42] Higher education has, in recent decades, created professional doctorates in many disciplines to enable professionals to reflect upon their practice with a view to enhancing it. See: The Open University: https://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/research-degrees/degrees-we-offer/professional_doctorates ; Anglia Ruskin University: https://aru.ac.uk/business-employers/develop-your-people/professional-doctorates . This trend is also reflected in the world of theological education for ministry with the creation of Foundation Degrees at undergraduate level and Professional Doctorates at postgraduate level to enable students to reflect upon the practice of ministry. The University of Roehampton and York St John University validate Foundation Degrees in Theology, Mission and Practice and Practical Theology, respectively (see above). Several universities validate professional doctorates in Practical Theology. See: Anglia Ruskin University: https://aru.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/professional-doctorate-in-practical-theology and University of Roehampton: https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/postgraduate-courses/Practical-Theology-DTh/ .

[43] To characterise Christian ministry as a profession or the Christian minister as a professional is contested. See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call: Book One: Living for God's Glory* (Paul Beasley-Murray, 2015), 25-56; Paul Beasley-Murray, *A College of Peers: The College of Baptist Ministers 2013-2021* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2021), 25-26; L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian*

Reflection is the intentional endeavour to think about, that is, analyze and evaluate, what professionals do. The purpose is to distill insights to improve the quality and effectiveness of practice.[44] Reflection in this sense focuses on practice; it concentrates attention on human agency or action and experience. In this tradition of learning, human agency or experience is the starting point for reflection[45] and reflection serves the pursuit of excellence in practice.[46] It is indicative of a desire on the part of professionals to learn and to improve the quality and effectiveness of what they do. The practice of reflection in professions draws upon the resources and theoretical perspectives of the social sciences to understand the dynamics at work in particular human contexts and practices. It is also recognised that thinking about human activity requires reflexivity, an intentional effort on the part of the one reflecting on practice to step back and consider how their identity shapes their understanding of self and others and what they do.[47]

Ministry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Lisa Kerry, "A Profession of Faith? Professionalism in Baptist Ministry," *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*, 5 (2022): 47-63.

[44] The focusing of reflection on the analysis and evaluation of practice (i.e., human agency) invites consideration of the values that underpin this concentration on human agency with a view to improving practice and achieving excellence (i.e., doing one's best to the highest possible standards). For example, is the stress within higher education and various professions on critical thinking and enhancement of practice compatible with the priority of Christian churches on formation for ministry as a holistic process and goal dependent upon God?

[45] Some practical theologians question experience as the necessary starting point for theological reflection. See Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 23-59. Pete Ward has argued for the value of an Applied Theology approach (i.e., the application of theological principle) in Ward, *Introduction to Practical Theology*, 3-4. I am sympathetic to the critique that practical theology need not necessarily begin with experience, but the purpose of this paper is to show how starting in experience can better connect with Christian doctrine.

[46] 'Excellence' is a contested term in the realm of Christian theology and ministry. Paul Beasley-Murray in a British context construes excellence in Christian ministry in terms of serving God and serving others with Christlike character and professional competence. See: Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call*, 25-56. L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong seek to rehabilitate 'excellence' in an American context where the secular overtones of success and achievement define the term even in the church. 'The worthiness – the excellence – of our lives is to be patterned in Christ, and specifically the hope and new life we discover in the power of the resurrection' (Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 3-4).

[47] The importance of reflexivity is recognised in pastoral theology, which is concerned with the theory and practice of pastoral care. See Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Post-Modern Approach*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

Theological Education: Learning and Appropriating from Secular Modes of Reflection

Theological education as the formation of men and women for Christian ministry in Britain increasingly recognises that the experience and agency of priests, ministers and pastors, what they do and encounter in their vocational roles (including the corporate practices of churches), constitutes a form of practice that can be studied, understood and explored. Consequently, reflection on the practice of ministry is now regarded as an important skill for Christian ministers to learn and apply. A key assumption is that understanding the human dynamics operative in a given situation in church or society is helpful in the process of reflection upon practice.[48] This assumption underlies much practical theology, although it is not often explicitly stated or argued for. It is simply assumed that non-theological disciplines offer useful insights, perspectives, and methods that can be deployed in the service of theology and ministry. This perspective stands in continuity with a key assumption advocated by Augustine, one of the most influential theologians in the history of Western theology. Augustine argued that 'spoiling the Egyptians', the critical appropriation of ideas and practices derived from wider (in his terms 'pagan') society and culture in the light of Jesus Christ, was consistent with Christian discipleship.[49] It must be acknowledged, there is always an attendant risk for Christianity in attempting critical appropriation. The importation of values inimical to the Gospel with potential to distort and undermine a programme of ministerial formation and the practice of theological reflection is a possibility, but, happily, not an inevitability.[50]

The Uniqueness of Theological Reflection

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[48] This assumption is made in congregational studies and pastoral theology in Britain, although it tends to be assumed rather than explicitly argued for. See Helen Cameron, Philip Richter, Douglas Davies and Frances Ward, *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM, 2005) and Margaret Whipp, *SCM Studyguide: Pastoral Theology* (London: SCM, 2013).

[49] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*: Book 2: Sections 40-42, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., The Library of Liberal Arts ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1958), 75-78.

[50] I will revisit this point. There is an emerging debate around how un-Gospel values have been imported into theological discourse historically and continue to threaten theology today. The relationship of Christianity to culture is a critical issue throughout the history of the church to the present day.

How is 'theological reflection' different from reflection on practice in education, social work and medicine? What makes theological reflection 'theological'? Similar to practitioners in medicine, education, and social work theological reflection is interested in the human dynamics within the practice of Christian ministry. Is theological reflection, therefore, simply the importation of secularised thinking stripped of God into Christian theology and ministry practice? Is it no more than a variant of sociology, which Peter Berger describes as a form of 'methodological atheism'?[51] Theological reflection in a Christian context is distinct from other forms of reflection on practice by virtue of its appeal to Christian theological beliefs (e.g., sin, the resurrection, God, salvation), Christian resources (e.g., the Bible, Christian doctrine, and church history), theological modes of thought (e.g., historical theology and systematic theology), and spiritual practices[52] (e.g., prayer, meditation, and worship). It also stands apart from other disciplines in its concern to discern the presence, purposes, and agency of God.[53]

Unhelpful, often Unrecognised, Influences on Modern Theology

As noted already, there is a risk inherent to Augustine's principle of 'spoiling the Egyptians'. It is possible to import, albeit inadvertently, values, perspectives and ideas into theology that are inimical to the Gospel. The problem is not peculiar to practical theology simply because it explicitly and intentionally uses 'secular' disciplines like sociology[54] and anthropology characterised by forms of

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[51] Peter R. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967; reprint, New York: Anchor, 1990), 180. Berger did not think that a commitment to sociology ruled out the possibility of God or faith.

[52] Some practitioners of theological reflection see a place for spiritual practices in the process of gathering data and reflecting theologically. See James Butler, "Prayer as a Research Practice? What Corporate Practices of Prayer Disclose about Theological Action Research," *Ecclesial Practices* 7.2 (2020): 241-57.

[53] A concern to discern the agency of God in the midst of human agency features in Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* and Mark J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

[54] The use of sociology by theology is fiercely contested. John Milbank has questioned recourse to the insights of sociology. See: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Robin Gill, contrary to Milbank, offers a

'methodological atheism'. All subject areas under the umbrella of theology (e.g., biblical studies and Christian doctrine) are at risk. Some quarters of academic theology recognise a need to take the human subjectivity of the theologian seriously[55] and recognise the importance of scrutinising the intellectual resources and currents that inform the various sub-disciplines within theology.[56]

2. Theological Reflection: A Partially Realised Practice

Dissatisfaction with the teaching and practice of theological reflection is evident among educators and practitioners. First, concerns are present within the field of practical theology and theological education about the effectiveness and relevance of theological reflection within theological curricula and subsequent practice and experience of ministry.[57] This critique refers to the pedagogy of theological reflection, the experience of students in theological education, the perceived and actual usefulness of what is taught, and the application of theological reflection as an ongoing aspect of ministry practice. Second, the methods of theological reflection widely taught and practised in ministerial formation include a 'step' that requires explicit engagement with the Christian tradition, most commonly the Bible but, in some instances, Christian doctrine. A key weakness observed by many tutors that teach theological reflection (here I include myself) is that students frequently incorporate limited and unsophisticated engagement with the Bible and/or Christian doctrine and relevant scholarship in these fields. Third, it must be acknowledged that theological reflection is too often practised without reference to divine

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positive assessment of sociology in the service of theology, Gill, *The Social Context of Theology* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975).

[55] Anthony Reddie points out that the Academic Guild of Theologians in Britain is resistant to acknowledging the subjectivity of the human agent with particular reference to Whiteness, a particular cultural way of being, Anthony G. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (London: Routledge, 2019), 13-37.

[56] This topic is too big to probe in detail here, but it is important to recognise the problem. The category of race is a pertinent example. See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of* Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) and *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002); James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

[57] Pippa Ross-McCabe, "Straw for the bricks at last? Theological Reflection under the Common Awards," *Practical Theology* 13.5 (2020): 466-479.

agency, spiritual practices, and Christian community. One irony in the current situation is that several methods of theological reflection are utilised by students as individuals, which were envisaged for use by groups to broaden participation in theology within churches.[58] Higher Education with its orientation to the individual agency of the student for assessment purposes contributes to theological reflection collapsing 'inwards' to the perception, experience, feelings, and cognition of the individual student.[59] All three elements merit careful attention. However, the primary concern in this paper is with element two. In particular, it will explore how students can be enabled to practise theological reflection with reference to Christian doctrine.[60] To this end, I contend that the thought of James McClendon, an American theologian little known in the United Kingdom, can be of assistance to the teaching and practice of theological reflection.

3. James McClendon: An Untapped Resource[61]

'Theology means struggle.'[62] These words commence *Ethics: Systematic Theology* by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and capture something of the perennial challenge to think faithfully about God and to relate what Christians believe about God to church and society. Thinking theologically is hard work. A sense of struggle runs through all three volumes of McClendon's *Systematic Theology*.

James McClendon was an American theologian in the twentieth century with roots in the Southern Baptist tradition. He taught for twelve years (1954-1966) at the Golden Gate Theological Seminary in the San Francisco area. In 1966 he and a fellow faculty member got into trouble for supporting a student initiative to raise funds to help a seminarian travel to Alabama to support Martin Luther King, Jr., in a march from Selma to Montgomery. The seminary administration took a dim view of this project. When McClendon protested the dismissal of his colleague from the seminary he experienced the same fate.

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[58] See Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle Resource Book* (Continuum: London, 2007 [1990]) and Killen and De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*.
[59] This collapse 'inwards' may be mitigated in part by critique from peers in seminars.
[60] This endeavour presupposes students possess some capacity to engage meaningfully with Christian doctrine. A basic orientation to Christian doctrine is required.
[61] James McClendon taught Christian doctrine.
[62] James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Ethics: Systematic Theology* vol. 1, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 17.

Eventually, McClendon was offered a tenured post at the University of San Francisco (1966-1969), which he, again, lost, because he protested against the Viet Nam War, writing a letter to President Johnson on official university stationary. He would eventually end up at the Church Divinity School (1971-1989), an Episcopalian seminary, where he sensed his theological outlook did not fit neatly either into the Catholic or Protestant categories that his Episcopalian context looked to. In about 1980 McClendon concluded that he needed to write a *Systematic Theology* to articulate the new direction of his thinking. He would ultimately complete his magnum opus at Fuller Theological Seminary where he served as Distinguished Scholar in Residence (1990 -2000).[63] McClendon developed two key concepts of particular relevance to theological reflection and engagement with Christian doctrine.[64]

Convictions and Theology as Convictional Discourse

McClendon helps the practice of theological reflection to be explicitly theological by asking (a) what convictions (i.e., deeply held, persistent theological and non-theological beliefs) are present in a situation and (b) intentionally placing the aforementioned convictions in conversation with Christian theological resources such as Scripture and Doctrine. I noted earlier how leading practical theologians recognise that too often engagement with theological resources in the practice of theological reflection is limited. For example, methods of theological reflection are often better at outlining <u>what</u> needs to be done, more than clarifying <u>how</u> to do it. McClendon offers a way forward with the latter, notably in the task of engaging Christian doctrine.

Convictions

'Theology' literally means 'talk about God'.[65] Such a definition is applicable to musings and speech about God of people in the pews, curious inquirers, church leaders, and academic theologians. James

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[63] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74.4 (2000): 1-7; Ched Myers, "Embodying the 'Great Story': An Interview with James W. McClendon," *The Witness* (December 2000): 12-15.

[64] For a brief introduction and overview see James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "What is A 'baptist' Theology?" *American Baptist Quarterly* 1.1 (1982): 16-39.

[65] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 117.

McClendon considers that such a definition is limited, '… it narrowly discriminates against polytheistic and atheistic theologies (and there are some), while at the same time it admits mere occasional or random religious thoughts.'[66] A revised notion of theology is needed that eschews identifying it with any one body of teaching (for example, Roman Catholic doctrine or Reformed doctrine) or making it so vague as to be useless. A more adequate notion of theology recognises that it is both 'deeply self-involving for its adherents'[67] and endeavours to produce reliable accounts of reality:[68]

> Theology, we might say, say has its objective pole, as well as its subjective one; it deals with matters of supreme importance to its partisans, yet seeks to do so in an orderly, even a scientific way.[69]

McClendon's approach to theology begins with the concept of a 'conviction'.[70] In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, *Ethics*, he outlines his notion of a conviction:

> Opinions are the stuff of debate and discussion … Convictions, on the other hand, are less readily expressed but more tenaciously held. It may take me a long time to discover my own convictions, but when I do, I have discovered … *myself*. My convictions are the gutsy beliefs I live out – or in failing to live them out I betray myself.[71]
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> A conviction is a persistent belief such that if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not be easily relinquished

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[66] McClendon, *Ethics*, 21.
[67] McClendon, *Ethics*, 22.
[68] McClendon, *Ethics*, 21-22.
[69] McClendon, *Ethics*, 22.
[70] James McClendon's seminal work on the nature of convictions was co-written with a philosopher, James Smith. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994). McClendon subsequently applied the concept in his three-volume systematic theology (1986 -2002).
[71] McClendon, *Ethics*, 22.

without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before.[72]

In *Doctrine*, the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, McClendon clarifies the multi-dimensional nature of convictions. They consist of three inter-connected elements. First, a conviction is cognitive; it is a statement of how we conceive, describe, and interpret reality. Second, a conviction is volitional; what we believe to be true about the nature of reality translates into the decisions we make and the actions we perform (or the things we don't do). Third, a conviction, is affective; the things we believe to be true exercise a powerful emotional appeal within us and energize powerful impulses in decision-making and action.[73]

McClendon's observations about the multi-dimensional nature of convictions resonate with the experience of Christian faith among students preparing for ministry and is consistent with key aims of contemporary programmes of ministerial formation. What students believe to be true about God is expressed passionately in their practice, in their embodied existence as Christian disciples and workers. Students with a sense of call to Christian ministry arrive at university or theological college to understand more about Christianity, the church and the world they inhabit not as detached observers of a religious and social phenomenon but as committed participants in a life of faith and communities of worship and witness. It is not, therefore, surprising that students, when they encounter, alternative accounts of Christian belief may find the experience disorienting. In effect, a consequence of studying theology in higher education is to submit personal convictions to scrutiny.[74]

McClendon acknowledges in his definition of a conviction that convictions can change, albeit with difficulty. When convictions alter identity changes. Indeed, conversion to Christ and growth in conformity to Christ in Christian discipleship presuppose the

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[72] McClendon, *Ethics*, 22-23.
[73] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology* vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 29.
[74] Mark Garner, Richard Burgess, and Daniel Eshun, "Submitting convictions to critical inquiry: a challenge for higher education," *Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education* 1 (2015): 81-100.

possibility of change.[75] According to McClendon, convictions can be consciously present in human experience, but also, simultaneously, inchoate in the unconsciousness of an individual or community; both forms of conviction exercise a profound influence on individuals and communities. Difficulties can arise in perceiving and articulating convictions:

> because growing up is a process and because self-deceit is a human possibility, we are not always (and may never easily be) aware of our actual convictions. Learning 'who I am' will take anyone time and effort. All the more is all this true of communities with their complex identities.[76]

McClendon's notion of a conviction is an invitation to engage in self-examination or reflexivity, to excavate and unearth the persistent beliefs that shape our pictures of the world, our decisions, and our actions. It is also a summons to identify and reflect upon the persistent beliefs of other individuals and communities. Identifying, clarifying, and articulating convictions requires an intentional and disciplined attentiveness to self, others, and communities of faith (and no faith). This process can be helped by engaging imaginatively with the Christian tradition and other sources of knowledge, wisdom, and learning, which, potentially, provide words, ideas, and metaphors to help frame and express what can begin as opaque and difficult to describe.

McClendon notes that some convictions are shared or held in common by members of the same community. Furthermore, different groups can vary tremendously from one another in the convictions they adhere to. One group may be adamant God exists.[77] Another can deny the existence of God.[78] Hence, according to McClendon,

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[75] Martyn Percy, ed., *Previous Convictions: Conversion in the Present* Day (London: SPCK, 2000). Change can work the other way round. People can abandon Christian faith just as much as they can embrace it. See Gordon Lynch, *Losing My Religion? Moving on from Evangelical Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).
[76] McClendon, *Doctrine,* 29.
[77] Christianity, Judaism and Islam.
[78] The Humanist Society; The New Atheists.

'convictional differences may be ultimate differences.'[79] Different communities are oriented to and live by different conviction sets.[80] Students entering programmes in theological education in Britain register awareness of differences between Christian denominations (indeed, within denominations!), across world religions, and within a pluralist and secular society. They also encounter challenges to their existing convictions by participating in an academic course in theology and ministry where their convictions are 'subjected to critical academic enquiry'.[81] The possibility exists for individuals and communities to hold contradictory convictions simultaneously, and to entertain hybrid convictions as part of a process towards, ultimately, affirming, modifying, or abandoning convictions. McClendon provides a vocabulary and a conceptual framework to think about and discuss similarities and dis-similarities between different sets of convictions.

The agreed convictions or deeply held, persistent beliefs of a community mould individuals. Yet, the beliefs of individuals are not always exact reflections of the implicit and explicit corporate beliefs adhered to and espoused by a community.[82] An individual, in practice, embraces, modifies or rejects the official, consensus or majority worldview maintained by a community (at congregational or denominational level).[83] Disagreement or adjustment in relation to convictions that are community-wide opens the door to tension and convictional conflict.[84] Exclusion from a community or a decision to

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[79] McClendon, *Ethics*, 23. Different communities, adhering to different sets of convictions can experience conflict with one another. McClendon addresses the complications of engagement between different convictions: McClendon, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, 101-109. Robin Gill explores convictions in conflict from a sociological perspective: Robin Gill, *Competing Convictions* (London: SCM, 1989).
[80] A 'conviction set' is a cluster of convictions held by an individual or community: McClendon, *Convictions*, 101-105.
[81] Garner, "Submitting Convictions," 90.
[82] Ann Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say I Am? Answers from the Pews* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). See also Gotobed, "Every Day With Jesus".
[83] Megan Phelps-Roper raised within Westboro Baptist Church documents the process of change in her convictions that issued in her decision to leave the community of faith she had known from a child in her mid-twenties. See: Megan Phelps-Roper, *Unfollow: A Journey from Hatred to Hope, Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church* (riverun: London, 2019).
[84] Convictions may be disputed explicitly and openly by individuals or groups within a congregation or denomination. Convictions may be contested internally within individual consciences, emotions, and cognitive processes, and privately in intimate relations of family and/or friendship. See: Phelps-Roper, *Unfollow.*

separate oneself from a community are potential outcomes. Influence from the opposite direction also occurs. An individual may challenge and contribute to the reshaping of the beliefs of a community. Furthermore, an individual can belong to several communities (e.g., a family, a congregation, a political party, a union, a professional body, a workplace, a neighbourhood, a learning community such as a school or university, an ethnic group) and thus encounter a variety of conviction sets. A Christian exposed to different conviction sets through belonging to or engaging with several communities may, therefore, undergo tension as a consequence of encountering competing convictions.[85] A key aspect of lived experience for individuals and communities is discerning a path through different sets of convictions.[86]

Theology

From the starting point of convictions, McClendon proceeds to define what he means by theology:

> Theology is the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.[87]

For McClendon, theological convictions emerge in relation to a community of faith.[88] He thus agrees with Friedrich Schleiermacher who, in the context of historic Protestant and Catholic streams of church in Europe, argued that it is evident theology arises and crystalizes with reference to a particular community of faith.[89]

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[85] Phelps, *Unfollow* and Gill, *Competing Convictions*.

[86] Such discernment is a feature of the church past and present. In the New Testament, the early church had to address whether or not Gentiles could be included in the church (Acts 15). The issue generated disagreement and conflict. The Christological and Trinitarian controversies in the first centuries of the early church were extremely contentious. Similarly, discussions around race and gender elicit intense convictional conflicts. Human sexuality is also a contested topic.

[87] McClendon, *Ethics*, 23.

[88] McClendon, *Ethics*, 17-44.

[89] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (English translation of *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirch im Zusammemhang dargestellt*, 2d ed. Berlin, 1830; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 88-93.

McClendon's broad community of reference is the church traditions clustered under his use of the term 'baptist'. The use of the lower case 'b' is deliberate to indicate a 'family likeness' among several denominations: Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren, Adventists, Baptists, and Pentecostals.[90] He consciously differentiates 'baptist' from Protestant[91] and Catholic expressions of Christian faith. His project is to write a theology to assist Christian communities positioned in a distinctive place on the spectrum of ecclesial existence. McClendon writes self-consciously to inform the life and witness of a particular type of Christian community, the church that is baptist in outlook.[92] Volume one of McClendon's *Systematic Theology*, '…begin[s] by finding the shape of the common life of the body of Christ, asking how the church must live to be truly the church. That investigation is here named *ethics*.'[93] Essentially, he asks: how are Christians to live to be true to the crucified and risen Jesus they follow?[94] Subsequent volumes in McClendon's *Systematic Theology* explore what the church must teach to be faithful to the Gospel[95] and how it must live in relation to society,[96] themes which echo interests important to many students enrolled in programmes of ministerial formation and, indeed, the churches that they will eventually serve.

In McClendon's work, theology entails discovering convictions in individuals and communities of faith, making sense of such convictions, and transforming them, where fidelity to the Gospel requires, in the context of relating them to convictions within Christianity and the wider world.[97] Theology is at heart a process of

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[90] McClendon, *Ethics*, 33-34.
[91] McClendon, in effect, has Magisterial traditions of Protestantism in mind: Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed. Although, in his American context, none of these traditions are 'established', so they cannot invoke the state to support their doctrine and policies.
[92] McClendon writes for 'baptists' but the wider church, Protestant and Catholic, is also in view. See: McClendon, *Ethics*, 17-44.
[93] McClendon, *Ethics*, 43.
[94] McClendon, *Ethics*, 41-43.
[95] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology* vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).
[96] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Witness: Systematic Theology* vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).
[97] McClendon resonates with Ballard and Pritchard and Swinton and Mowat in viewing the purpose of (practical) theology to be enabling faithfulness to the Gospel.

convictional discourse,[98] a conversation, an interchange of convictions, for the purpose of Christian discipleship and faithfulness to the Gospel in the life and witness of the church. McClendon's explication of convictions, notably in *Doctrine*, 'seeks to enable churches to discover the convictions that inform their practices, and to facilitate testing them for fidelity and truth.'[99] The perspective from which McClendon assesses ideas and practices is a Christological one:

> Christian doctrine … begins and ends with the confession, *Iesous Kyrios*, Jesus is Lord. But that confession by itself is nonesuch, a word in an unknown tongue; uninterpreted it says nothing to us. To see its force we must see this ancient confession tightly woven into a broad tapestry of other convictions.[100]

Doctrine explicates Christian doctrine centred on the person of Jesus Christ, viewed against the backdrop of Israel's story in the Old Testament, which, ultimately, fits into the broader context of a Trinitarian understanding of God.[101] McClendon's approach is congruent with the aspiration of many programmes of ministerial formation, which seek to equip students to identify, interpret, critique, and transform the practices of ministry and mission, corporately of the church and personally of ministers, in the light of Jesus Christ [102]

In *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* McClendon shows how the convictions of an individual can serve to challenge the corporate convictions of faith communities and society.[103] He advocates paying attention to the 'compelling

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[98] Gotobed, "Living with Jesus," 139-140.

[99] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 29.

[100] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 64.

[101] Here McClendon is echoed by Paul S. Fiddes, "The Story and the Stories: Revelation and the Challenges of Postmodern Culture," in *Faith in the Centre: Christianity and Culture*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2001), 79-80.

[102] Some practical theologians stress the need to take more account of the Holy Spirit. See: Mark J. Cartledge, *The Mediation of the Spirit: Interventions in Practical* Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015) and Sheryl Joanne Arthur, "Negotiating the non-negotiable: the Elim Pentecostal movement and theological normativity," *Practical Theology* 13.5 (2020): 466-479.

[103] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002 [1990]).

biographies'[104] of Christians that embody 'compelling images' or Christian doctrines that speak to the Christian community in their generation in a necessary and vital manner.[105] He points to the importance of listening to the stories of faithful disciples to discover what God is saying to the church today through examination of the biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr., (A leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA), Dag Hammerskjöld (First General Secretary of the United Nations), Clarence Jordan (A pioneer of inter-racial co-operation among Southern Baptists in the USA), and Charles Ives (A musician). McClendon further explores the connection between convictions and the lived experience of discipleship in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, *Ethics*, through the lives of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Dorothy Day, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[106]

In the 1990s, while teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary, McClendon was invited to lead a church following the dismissal of a minister in controversial and conflicted circumstances. He recounts his experience and the sermons preached during this season of his life in *Making Gospel Sense to a Troubled Church*.[107] His preaching was informed by the tense situation he addressed and the convictions expounded in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* on doctrine. The interplay in his role as a pastor between the lived experience of a community of faith and the convictions taking shape in his academic work is evident in the pages of *Making Gospel Sense to a Troubled People*.[108] His role as pastor in the context of a church recovering from conflict is a mediating one between a community of faith and his academic study of Christian doctrine, a role not dissimilar to that of a ministerial student, who exercises a mediating role as a ministry practitioner between academic studies in the formational contexts of a theological college or programme and a community of faith or Christian organisation.

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[104] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 89.

[105] Individual lives embody convictions attested in the Scriptural witness to God.

[106] Questions have been raised about the satisfactoriness of the biographies McClendon includes in his *Systematic Theology*. McClendon's reading of the lives he chooses is conditioned by his own biography, prejudices, limited knowledge (i.e., what was known about his chosen figures at the time of writing), and conceptual horizons. See Gale Richards' article in this volume of the *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*.

[107] McClendon, *Making Gospel Sense to a Troubled Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004 [1995]).

[108] McClendon, *Making Gospel Sense*, 23, 70, and 115.

McClendon in his written output and ministry practice commends being attentive to convictions embedded in the individual lives of disciples (mainly through literary sources), communities of faith (in both historical records and the lived experience of ministry), culture in society (through studying cultural materials, writings, and practices), and the academic exploration of the Christian doctrinal tradition.

McClendon's work is suggestive and rich with potential to extend and apply his method beyond literary representations of faith into study of the lived experience of individuals and communities of faith to identify the convictions of ordinary believers,[109] communities of faith, and the Christian doctrinal tradition, to understand and interpret such convictions, and to transform these convictions in the sense of conformity in life and witness to Jesus Christ.
Several interpreters of McClendon are indebted to his insights into the nature of convictions and recognise the importance of attending to the stories of communities of faith,[110] the convictions of individual disciples,[111] and gleaning the convictions that matter to faith communities from their corporate practices.[112] This approach to doing theology coincides with a growing interest in lived religion among sociologists of religion,[113] practical theologians,[114] and pastoral theologians.[115] Elements within the academic guilds of theology and

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[109] 'Ordinary' in the sense of not possessing formal theological education. See: Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[110] Paul S. Fiddes, "Theology and a Baptist Way of Community," in *Doing Theology in a Baptist* Way, Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard L. Kidd, and Michael Quick (Oxford: Whitley, 2000), 26-27.

[111] Julian R. Gotobed, "Living with Jesus: Practical Christologies in Two Boston American Baptist Churches" (PhD. diss., Boston University, 2010).

[112] Christopher Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004).

[113] Nancy T. Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Robert Wuthnow, *What Happens When We Practice Religion? Textures of Devotion in Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[114] Ann Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say I Am? Answers from the Pews* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

[115] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Post-Modern Approach*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

sociology in North American and Britain are currently interested in lived religion.

How then, in the context of McClendon's body of work and the growing interest in discovering convictions embedded in lived religion, can students engaged in ministerial formation be enabled to identify convictions and practise theology as convictional discourse in the service of theological reflection, with a view to informing church practices and, specifically, the practice of ministry? At the University of Roehampton, a colleague, Andrew Rogers, and I devised a Convictions Study Day to introduce McClendon's concepts of convictions and theology as convictional discourse to first-year students on the Ministerial Theology (MT) Foundation Degree (FdA).[116] The particulars of the Study Day evolved with the passage of time, but the essential structure remained the same from 2016-2020.

4. James McClendon in Action: A Convictions Study Day

The Convictions Study Day was first introduced as part of the Ministerial Theology module 'Contexts of Ministry One'[117] in 2016-17.[118] It was conceived as a preliminary step to introducing theological reflection, at a later stage, in the form of the pastoral cycle.
The review of the first iteration of the Convictions Study resulted in a reduction of learning outcomes from four to two on the basis that too much had been attempted in one day.[119] The Aim, Learning

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[116] Now renamed: Theology, Mission and Practice (TMP).
[117] This module introduces students to critical theological reflection on practice in their ministry context.
[118] It was subsequently relocated to a module on 'Study Skills' from 2017-18. Ministerial Theology has recently been re-validated. The 'Study Skills' module has been reshaped and 'The Convictions Study Day' is no longer included within it.
[119] The original four learning outcomes were:
    1. Identify our convictions (explicit and implicit) and those of our communities
    2. Be aware of how our convictions are embedded and mediated through artefacts, accounts and practices
    3. Reflect on how we engage with various others in the light of our convictions
    4. Consider the role of our convictions in our theological education
    Elements of each of the four original learning outcomes were still present in the Study Day, but it seemed helpful to simplify the stated learning outcomes from four to two to make the day as conceptually clear and as accessible as possible at the outset. The change is reflected in the broad shape of the day.

Outcomes, and Structure of the Convictions Study Day in 2019-20 (the last one I participated in) were as follows:

Aim

To help students become more self-aware of their convictions and so their significance for their theological education and more broadly their discipleship of Christ.

Learning outcomes
1. Identify our convictions (explicit and implicit) and those of our communities
2. Reflect on how convictions may change

Study Day Programme: Broad Outline

09.30-11.00 Session A	Introducing convictions
11.00-11.30	Break
11.30-13.00 Session B	Identifying our convictions
13.00-14.00	Lunch
14.00-15.30 Session C	Deepening or changing our convictions

The more detailed outline that follows sets out how McClendon's concepts of convictions and theology as convictional discourse were introduced. Enough information is provided to illustrate the main content of the day and the direction of travel, but not every detail is included. The emphasis of the teaching input and exercises are to help students engage in the practice of reflexivity, to take a step back to identify their personal convictions, and to identify the convictions of other individuals and communities. Multiple exercises were employed to help students approach the key task (i.e., identifying convictions and how they can change) through engagement with explicit and implicit convictions. Students confirmed through their experience during the Study Day that McClendon is correct: convictions are not always straightforward to identify and articulate. It is hard work. The Study Day invited students to embrace a new conceptual framework and to begin to internalise it through undertaking practical exercises with peers and tutors to make connections with the New Testament, individuals, congregations, and denominations. Encountering difference in dialogue with others is critical to clarifying our personal

convictions and scrutinising their veracity and coherence.[120] Thinking with others is also vital in understanding the convictions of individuals and communities different to ourselves.[121] Alan Jacobs is correct, 'Thinking for yourself is impossible.'[122]

The programme is elaborated to make clear what was done, but also to stimulate the reader of this article. The reader is encouraged to use some of the exercises and questions to excavate your personal convictions, the convictions of the various communities (e.g., congregational or academic) you belong to, and, perhaps, of individuals and communities that differ from you in belief and practice. Finally, you are invited to consider how your convictions have changed and what factors contributed to change taking place.[123]

Study Day Programme: Detailed Break Down

The tutor responsible for facilitating a particular segment of the programme is indicated by initials **AR** (Andrew Rogers) and **JG** (Julian Gotobed):

09.30-11.00 Session A
The main focus of Session A is learning outcome one.
AR: The introduction presents an overview of the purpose, learning outcomes, and programme of the Convictions Study Day. (10 minutes)

AR: Students undertake an initial task in pairs. Consider the following question: What do you think are the three most important beliefs in the church you belong to? (15 minutes)

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[120] The majority of students on the FdA/BTh Ministerial Theology in 2017-20 were from African Pentecostal backgrounds. A small number of students from other denominations were also present (e.g., Baptist, Methodist, URC, Church of England). Students encountered similarities and differences in convictions during Study Days.
[121] McClendon, *Witness*, 296-302.
[122] Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Profile, 2017), 36-39. Jacobs points to the experience of Megan Phelps-Roper from Westboro Baptist Church, an account of which had appeared in an article written by Adrien Chen in *The New Yorker* for November 23, 2015. Jacob's interaction and reflection on the experience of Phelps-Roper appears in Jacobs, *How to Think*, 31-34.
[123] Footnotes direct the reader to resources used in the Study Day.

JG: McClendon's notion of convictions is introduced. The cognitive, volitional and affective dimensions of convictions are elaborated. McClendon's definition of theology as convictional discourse is included. The transformative possibilities of convictions changing are pointed out. (15 minutes)

JG/AR: Interview each other: a) What are your convictions? b) To what extent are your convictions shaped by your communities? c) How have you come to know what your convictions are? d) How do your convictions shape how you do theology? (25 minutes)

AR: Students are asked to identify convictions embedded in artefacts, in this instance two songs: 'The Servant King'[124] by Graham Kendrick and 'Fire, Fire, Fire'[125] by Donnie McClurkin.
(25 minutes)

11.30-13.00 Session B
JG: The aim of this session is to explore learning outcome one in more depth. The session looks at explicit & implicit convictions; individual and community convictions; it examines how convictions are embedded in our communities in artefacts, accounts, activities (i.e., practices). (15 minutes)

JG: Artefact: A church website is viewed [St Mary's, Stoke Newington].[126] Students are invited to identify the convictions embedded in words and images in the website and then discuss with the rest of the cohort. (10 minutes and 5 minutes plenary feedback)

AR: Students engage in a group activity to work with three pre-selected materials and identify the convictions embedded in them. Each group consists of four students and appoints a spokesperson as a scribe and to report their findings to the entire cohort. Groups were

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[124] https://www.grahamkendrick.co.uk/home/graham-kendrick-songs/let-god-arise/the-servant-king-from-heaven-you-came (accessed: 24/06/22).
[125] https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/3984745/Donnie+McClurkin/Caribbean+Medley (accessed: 25/06/22).
[126] The website content, imagery, and music have all changed since first used in the Convictions Study Day. Websites are useful windows into the self-perception of congregations.

also encouraged to reflect on the process of identifying convictions. (30 minutes in groups and 15 minutes plenary feedback)

A list of doctrines derived from Tony Lane's *Exploring Christian Doctrine* was displayed on PowerPoint to provide some categories to match with themes embedded in the artefacts.[127] Three artefacts are considered: First, An Anglican prayer (The Prayer of Preparation from the Order of Celebration of Holy Communion in *Common Worship*).[128] Second, a church noticeboard. Third, the preface to a Free Church Service of Communion (e.g., 'Come to this sacred table, not because you must, but because you may … but because in your frailty and sin you stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help').[129]

JG: Students are then asked to reflect on their personal convictions. Each student pairs up with a member from a different group to ask and answer the following questions: a) What are your convictions? b) To what extent are your convictions shaped by your communities? c) How have you come to know what your convictions are? (10-15 minutes)

14.00-15.30 Session C
AR: The aim of this session is to explore learning outcome two. How does convictional change occur?
How do we engage with other Christian communities who have different convictions to ours?

- Action: Do we reject, ignore, engage?
- Emotion: Do we experience shock, fear, anxiety, anger, curiosity, excitement?
- Character: Do we manifest confidence, humility, faithfulness, openness, courage?

Who are these 'others'?

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[127] Tony Lane, *Exploring Christian Doctrine* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014). These included: Creation of the universe, Humanity, Sin, Providence, Evil and Suffering, the work of Christ, the person of Christ, Holy Spirit, The Trinity, God, Baptism, Justification, Sanctification, Grace, The Church, Holy Communion, The End Times, Hell.

[128] The Archbishops' Council, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 168.

[129] Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 81.

- Potential Others: Tutors, journal articles, books, fellow students, other churches.

What are the potential outcomes of engagement?

- We may affirm, nuance, revise, or transform our convictions.

How do we engage with other Christians, whether in person or in writing, other students, tutors, other church communities when they have different convictions? (13 minutes)

JG and **AR** explore two New Testament narratives where key characters undergo convictional change:

JG: Luke's account of Saul on the Road to Damascus is an example of an individual changing their convictions (Acts 9:1-22). The passage is read, followed by a brief commentary and then interaction with students. (7 minutes)

AR: The story of Peter and Cornelius is an example of personal and community conviction change (Acts 10:1-33). The passage is read, followed by a brief commentary and then interaction with students. (7 minutes)

AR/JG: Students were required to read articles by Billy Graham[130] and Martin Luther King, Jr.,[131] ahead of the Convictions Study Day. These church leaders, who both exercised prominent ministries in America and internationally in the 1950s and 1960s, explain how some of their theological convictions changed over the previous decade. Students pair up to discuss their findings and then engage in a plenary discussion to consider how Billy Graham's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, convictions changed. (15 minutes)

JG: The cohort explores a case study of the Worldwide Church of God [WWCG], which underwent significant convictional change and eventually altered its name to reflect a new theology and identity. It is now known as Grace Communion International. This case study

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[130] Billy Graham, "What Ten Years Have Taught Me," *The Christian Century* (February 17, 1963). https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/what-ten-years-have-taught-me (accessed: 25/06/22).

[131] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence," *The Christian Century* (April 13, 1960). https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/what-ten-years-have-taught-me (accessed: 25/06/22).

illustrates the difficulty of grappling with convictional change within a denomination. Grace Communion International, in its original form, was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong in the United States of America. It changed radically from a community hostile to orthodox Christian convictions to one that embraces orthodox Christian convictions.[132] Grace Communion International, underwent a profound transformation of its theological convictions, for several reasons, including a fresh reading of the New Testament and Christian doctrinal tradition.[133] Two extended sections of the documentary film *Called to be Free*[134] are shown to introduce students to the story of the Worldwide Church of God. Students are set two questions while watching the video: (1) What were the founding convictions of WWCG? (2) How did convictional change occur in WWCG? (13 minute video + 5 minutes feedback and 13 minute video + 5 minutes feedback)

JG: Concluding thoughts on convictions and Study Skills. McClendon's definition of theology as convictional discourse is reiterated as a framework for bringing convictions from different contexts into dialogue with one another. How does the Convictions Study Day relate to the rest of the programme? How does it help students with other modules (e.g., 'Introduction to Christian Doctrine' [ICD] and 'Contexts of Ministry One' [CoM1]) on the Foundation Degree in Ministerial Theology?

How do convictions help us with theological reflection?
- **Reflexivity** – We become aware of what we as individuals care about. Hence, we can understand ourselves better.
- **Diaries/Journals[135] [CoM1]** – We can identify what other individuals and communities care about. We can understand them better.

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[132] See: https://www.gci.org/aboutus/gci-denomination (accessed 07 April, 2022).
[133] A complex range of factors contributed to questioning within the Worldwide Church of God that, ultimately, issued in a fresh reading of the New Testament, the history of the Christian church, and Christian doctrine.
[134] The video can be purchased as a DVD from Living Hope Video Ministries https://sourceflix.com/product/called-to-be-free/ or viewed on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWAtvE1xiRk .
[135] It is common practice for ministry students to keep diaries/journals to record experiences and reflections relating to attachments and placements.

- **Connections [ICD]** – We can relate the convictions we discover in ourselves and others (individuals and communities) to convictions in the academy (e.g., scholarly books and journal articles!).

Convictions and Christian Discipleship

Transformation in Christ: Convictions enable us to see our lives in the light of the Gospel. They can be a catalyst for change to grow in Christ as we discern what in our lives is consistent with the Gospel, what requires modification, and that which needs to be abandoned. Convictions are significant and not to be taken lightly! The transformative potential inherent to convictions can be represented diagrammatically:

Convictions → Identity → Practice = Transformation (12 minutes)

Commentary

The Convictions Study Day was designed to enable students to identify four types of conviction: biblical, personal, congregational, and denominational, and to recognise that convictions can change and that convictional change has been a part of Christian experience from the very beginning of the church:

    Biblical Convictions are convictions embedded in the witness of Scripture. The day focuses on New Testament narratives that indicate convictions changed in the light of encounter with Jesus Christ: Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 1-19) and Peter's meeting with Cornelius (Acts 10:1-33).

    Personal Convictions are the convictions adhered to by individuals. Tutors and students examine their personal convictions and how these may have changed with the passage of time and what factors contributed to change.

    Congregational Convictions are the convictions expressed by communities of faith, typically expressed in artefacts (what congregations make), accounts (the stories congregations tell), and

activities (what congregations do together),[136] especially in the corporate practices of worship and mission.

      Denominational Convictions are the convictions articulated by a denomination, the shared belief characteristic of corporate identity and practices. The Study Day attends to denominational materials used in public worship and the transformation of the doctrinal beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God (now Grace Communion International).[137]

Five Years On

The Convictions Study Day devised at the University of Roehampton represented a starting point to introduce McClendon's concepts of convictions and theology as convictional discourse to students; it was repeated every year from 2016 to 2020 in the first term of Year 1 of the Foundation Degree (FdA). I hoped McClendon's framework would, ultimately, be applied in multiple modules across the FdA/BTh programmes. Indeed, explicit reference was made to Introduction to Christian Doctrine and Contexts of Ministry One. McClendon's framework was developed further in the Year 2 FdA module 'Modern Christian Doctrine' and the Year 3 BTh modules 'Theology and Practice of Pastoral Care' and 'Church and Society' (all taught by me). However, the concepts of convictions and theology as convictional discourse were not implemented consistently across other FdA/BTh modules to internalise the concepts in students and to enable them to develop there proficiency in utilising this approach. Engagement with McClendon's framework of convictions and theology as convictional discourse never took root in the FdA/BTh Ministerial Theology and subsequently lapsed for several reasons: my departure from the University of Roehampton, a lack of consensus among colleagues to implement the framework across the FdA/BTh, and a revalidation of the programme in 2022 where other matters took priority. The key lessons I draw from my experience are: first, students do find McClendon's framework illuminating and it enables them to identify personal and communal convictions and to relate them to the Christian tradition; second, a shared commitment by colleagues across

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[136] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Culture and Identity in the Congregation" in Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, eds. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 78-104.
[137] https://www.gci.org/about-us/ (accessed: 23/06/22).

a programme is important to properly implement the convictions and theology as convictional discourse framework programme-wide; third, it is necessary to persist with the framework through a programme of studies over two or three years for it to become embedded in students and for proficiency in its use to mature. Although, McClendon is no longer a feature of Theology, Mission and Practice at the University of Roehampton, students and colleagues in the Cambridge Theological Federation are warming to McClendon and finding him a useful resource in theological reflection modules in both the Cambridge BTh and Durham Common Awards programmes. There may be a second coming, yet!

Note on Contributor

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- To support pastor–theologians in academic publishing
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We welcome submissions from Baptist pastor–theologians.

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Cover Image

Designed by Micky Munroe. The image is based on a painting that was for many years displayed in Helwys Hall, Regent's Park College, Oxford and was designed by Henry Wheeler Robinson (College Principal, 1920-44), representing the five principles of Baptist life: faith, baptism, evangelism, fellowship and freedom. See H. Wheeler Robinson, 'The Five Points of a Baptist's Faith' *Baptist Quarterly* 11.2-2 (January-April 1942), 4–14.