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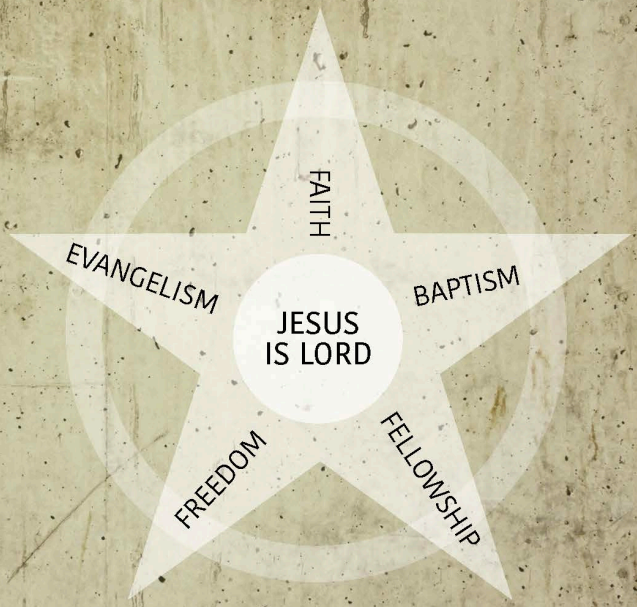
in context



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Editorial

It is really encouraging to see Baptists engaged in postgraduate research. Since 2010 over 40 PhDs or equivalent have been completed in the areas of doctrine, biblical studies, church history, and practical theology.[1] Since 2020 I am aware of at least five being completed: Martin Hobgen on Baptists and disability (Manchester); Tim Judson on Bonheoffer and lament (Bristol/Aberdeen); Sian Hancock on faith development and girls (Birmingham); Israel Oluwole Olofinjana on reverse missiology (Roehampton); and David Wise on developing a multi-ethnic local congregation (Roehampton).

Theology Live, this journal, and the recently launched Baptist Academic Network all have a focus of gathering, supporting, and sharing theology being done by Baptists. In addition are other theological gatherings, like Baptist Theology North and Hearts and Minds,[2] all of which are contributing to spaces that given attention to thinking about faith. The work of theology across its disciplines is vital to enabling churches to be faithful to the gospel and imaginative in worship and mission. While Baptists have a tradition of pragmatism, this should not overlook the fact that there is also an emphasis in our history on thinking and reflecting theologically. We want to promote and inspire this emphasis.[3]

In this fifth edition of the journal, we offer three articles.

Stuart Blythe's article is an engagement with preaching in the Covid pandemic. Focusing on the context of the pandemic, Blythe offers an analysis of five sermons and what they tell us about Baptist preaching.

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[1] I have attempted to list all known PhDs by British Baptists here: https://andygoodliff.typepad.com/my_weblog/british-baptist-phds.html.

[2] Baptist Theology North is an annual one day theological conversation for Baptists in the North of England .Hearts and Minds is an annual one day conference organized by of Bristol Baptist College, Cardiff Baptist College and Regent's Park College, Oxford.

[3] See Andy Goodliff, 'A (New) Call to Mind', *Baptist Ministers' Journal* (July 2017), 3-5.

Nigel Wright's article was first given at a community day for Bristol Baptist College and sets out the importance of the 'Bristol tradition' and what he suggests is also a Baptist tradition for being Baptist.

Lisa Kerry's article argues for the importance of professional practice in the formation and life of Baptist ministry. Kerry has recently begun doctoral work at Bristol Baptist College and her article sets out some of the area that her research will be focus on, as well as some initial suggestions which she puts forward for discussion.

The Editors are grateful to Micky Munroe for the redesign of our front cover. For more details on the symbol on the cover, see the note at the end of the journal.

Andy Goodliff

God's Rhetoric: Preaching and Covid-19 in the Atlantic Provinces, Canada

Stuart Blythe

Abstract: This paper offers a rhetorical analysis of five sermons preached in Baptist churches on the same day in the Atlantic Provinces of Canada in response to the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. It highlights their similarities and differences in relation to one another and a wider analysis of Baptist preaching. To do this, the analysis focuses on how the Bible was interpreted, the purpose of the sermons, the cultural and theological understandings contained within the sermons, and the language used in delivery. It demonstrates that despite differences, these sermons share a commonality in their approach to interpreting the Bible and applying it to context: an approach which is recognisably Baptist.

Key Words: Covid-19, preaching, sermons, rhetoric.

Introduction

On 22 March 2020, the province of Nova Scotia in Canada declared a State of Emergency in response to Covid-19 (C-19). This followed similar actions in the other Atlantic Provinces in the preceding days.[1] These actions highlighted the significance and seriousness of the situation and brought into force governmental restrictions.[2] These restrictions impacted, among others, church congregations. Several congregations responded by putting their church services entirely online. This action meant that neither leaders nor members could ignore the reality of the situation. This raised not simply social but theological questions for ecclesial communities to which at least some people look for guidance and reassurance.

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[1] The Atlantic Provinces are four provinces in Eastern Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador. The total population is in the region of two and a half million people.

[2] The specific powers invoked varied in each province, but all imposed restrictions on people gathering with others.

In this article, I describe and discuss the 'rhetoric' in the sermons of five Baptist churches in the Atlantic Provinces the following Sunday, 29 March 2020. This discussion will consist of a textual rhetorical analysis of these sermons specifically concerning their response to the Covid-19 'crisis'.[3] This analysis focuses on how the Bible was interpreted, the purpose of the sermons, the cultural and theological understandings contained within the sermons, and the language used in delivery. This analysis demonstrates some diversity but also a considerable amount of commonality in the rhetoric of these sermons, indicating a widely shared arguably Baptist perspective in response to the Covid-19 situation.

Methodology

My methodology is discourse analysis: more specifically, rhetorical textual analysis. I analyse the rhetoric in the transcribed texts of five sermons which were publicly available online.[4]

The specific rhetorical strategies I use to analyse the sermons come from the work of two authors. The first is *The Four Voices of Preaching: Connecting Purpose and Identity Behind the Pulpit*, by Robert Stephen Reid.[5] The second, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* by John S. McClure.[6] These analytical strategies are designed for sermons. They have been used before by Joel C. Gregory to analyse Baptist sermons in his *Baptist Preaching: A Global Anthology*.[7] As with Gregory, I use the work of Reid to identify the purpose of the sermons. I use the work of McClure to describe and discuss how the sermons represent and use the Bible, culture, theology, and language. The distinctive feature here is that I provide a detailed comparative and cumulative analysis of five

[3] I received a small grant from Acadia University for this research. This paid for a research assistant to transcribe the sermons from their original audio or video format. Thanks go to both Acadia University and Christine Merrill for transcribing the sermons.
[4] The quotations come from the transcription of the preached sermons as I have them with only the occasional grammatical editing in relation to commas. I have retained North American spelling in the quotations.
[5] Robert Stephen Reid, *The Four Voices of Preaching: Connecting Purpose and Identity Behind the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).
[6] John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).
[7] Joel C. Gregory, ed. *Baptist Preaching: A Global Anthology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

sermons delivered on the same Sunday in an identifiable denominational and geographical context in the face of a shared experience of a pandemic.[8] I compare my findings with the more general findings of Gregory.

This research aims to focus on the sermons, not the congregations or the individual preachers. Therefore, while I describe the sermons, which are publicly available online, I do not explicitly name the preachers or the congregations. Furthermore, the purpose is not to determine what was a good or a bad sermon. It is instead to offer a rhetorical analysis of how these sermons responded to the Covid-19 situation. As such, this methodology will highlight similarities and differences within a range of possible and legitimate options.

The Sermons

The five sermons come from Baptist Churches in Atlantic Canada belonging to the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada (CBAC). In 2019 this body reported 450 congregations with a total membership of 36,226 people and a total average Sunday attendance of 26,207.[9] I did not choose these sermons to provide a representative sample. They are a snapshot. Five was a manageable number. The primary criteria were that the sermons were publicly available, allowed some diversity in terms of the gender and ethnicity of the preachers, and at least one sermon from each province.

Sermon Summaries

In these summaries, I will highlight the main scriptural passage associated with each sermon, how the sermon proceeded, and what appears as the key message. Other scriptures were also referred to in each sermon by way of allusion and supporting reference.

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[8] Gregory also uses Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations of the Mind* (3rd Ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2010) to identify different national characteristics. I do not because of the very general nature of these categories and because all sermons were delivered in Canada.

[9] Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada "Yearbook 2020," https://baptist-atlantic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-CBAC-Yearbook-Web.pdf, SM 22, accessed, 9 August 2021. These are 2019 figures reported in 2020. The 2021 report gives no summary totals for 2020. The accuracy of these figures is debatable.

In sermon 1, the scripture text was Luke 12:22-32. The sermon quickly identified the focus of the scripture as being about not worrying and having faith in a God who provides in all circumstances. It then proceeds to describe and defend this idea by referencing experience and scripture while moving towards a celebratory conclusion that people can say, 'It is well'. In this sermon, therefore, Covid-19 was a trial in which, as in other trials, people could have faith in God to provide for them.

In sermon 2, the scriptures read before the sermon were 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 2 Thess 2:1-17. Under three main headings, this sermon explored various themes and sub-themes related to the 'the last days and the Second Coming of Christ'. These themes included the 'Thief in the Night', 'Man of Lawlessness', and 'Rapture'. This sermon, therefore, addressed questions raised by the 'unprecedented days' of Covid-19 in relation to biblical themes.

In sermon 3, the scripture was Jeremiah 29:4-13. In this sermon, the experience of Covid-19 was likened to the unsettling and unwelcome experience of 'exile'. The sermon proceeded through the passage in sections vv 4-6, 7, 8-9, and 10-13, highlighting and applying ideas. The sermon focus was that as with the people of Israel, Christian people could 'find a new normal, live, and thrive', be 'a blessing to the city', while trusting in the plans of God for them, despite the present uncertainty.

In sermon 4, the scripture was John 11. The sermon structure involved moving progressively through several sections of the narrative, although without application at this point. The application came in four points at the end. In this sermon, the grief and confusion of Mary and Martha at Lazarus's death and Jesus' delay is related to peoples experience of Covid-19. The primary message was that despite these valid feelings, Jesus's compassion and power can provide hope in this time that Jesus will do 'something greater' than 'we could ever anticipate'.

In sermon 5, the scripture was Isaiah 49:1-7. It was part of a series leading up to Easter. First, the sermon worked through the passage read, vv 1, 2, 3-4, 5-6 and 7 and explained the verses as they applied to

Jesus as the Messiah. Following this explanation, it drew out the application concerning the Passion of Jesus, the Easter message, and Covid-19. Thus, this Servant Song was offered as a message of 'hope in dark times', such as people were experiencing with Covid-19.

As indicated in the summaries by the necessity of the moment, all these sermons addressed the Covid-19 situation. Prayers followed all sermons relating the sermon to context and congregation. I included these prayers in the analysis. With the concluding prayer, four of these sermons lasted less than 20 minutes and one more than double that length of time.

Use of Scripture

As indicated above, these sermons draw on a range of scriptural texts and genres from the Old and New Testaments. Despite this diversity, how the sermons interpret these different scriptures demonstrates a clear similarity in what McClure calls the 'scriptural code'.[10]

The scriptural code is concerned with 'any direct or indirect verbal allusions to the words of the biblical text or to the events to which the biblical text testifies'.[11] Such references involve a form of sacred 'remembering that is intended to move a person or event from the past into the present, into the here and now'.[12] That is, the scriptural code is concerned with how scripture is recalled into the present, the way it is interpreted and applied.

McClure identifies five different ways in which the scriptures are interpreted and applied in sermons. The first is 'translation', where the preacher 'translates in an almost commonsense fashion primarily what happens in the text and what the text is about' into the present context.[13] The second is 'transition', where the preacher drawing on the historical-critical method wrestles with ambiguities in the scripture and issues behind the text to get at the meaning of the text. The third approach is 'transposition'. This is where the preacher is particularly

[10] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 15-51.
[11] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 15-16.
[12] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 16-17.
[13] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 20.

interested in the literary nature and function of the text and with replicating that in the form and function of the sermon.[14] The fourth approach is 'transformation'. In this approach, the preacher is less concerned to mine meaning for application and more concerned to proclaim the gospel as a disruptive claim on the life of the listeners.[15] The fifth approach is 'trajection'. In this approach, the preacher brings contextual issues to the scriptural text and seeks to see how they bring new meanings into that context.[16] Each of these approaches promotes a different way of remembering scripture.[17]

In all five sermons, the message was very clearly related to the scripture texts read before or during the sermon. For example, in sermon 4, we read, 'If you want to pull that up in the Bible – John chapter 11 – we're going to be going through that, sort of step-by-step'. All the sermons used similar sorts of expressions to explicitly draw the listeners' attention to scripture as an authoritative source for determining life and behaviour.

In turn, there was a rhetorical commonality in the way in which the sermons interpreted the Scriptures. There are some examples of a transformative kerygmatic emphasis associated with McClure's transformation approach. This is a move from text to context, which aims to keep the church 'in close touch with the kerygma, the proclamation of the scandalous claims of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ' and the claim of that upon the listener.[18]

> He was the one who would suffer and die, displaying the splendor and the love, salvation of God through the cross. What seemed like futility and defeat, his death would display God's power and victory, setting the captives free, defeating sin and death, not just for Israel and the tribes of Jacob, but for the entire world…This is the story of Easter. Isaiah's Servant Song pointing to Easter is one of hope in dark times. (Sermon 5)

[14] McClure, Four *Codes of Preaching*, 29-31.
[15] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 36-38.
[16] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 42-43.
[17] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 19-46.
[18] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 40.

While, however, there are some examples of kerygmatic proclamation in the sermons, the dominant approach across all five sermons is McClure's first approach of translation.

Translation involves bringing over ideas stated in the scripture to what they mean in the present. To do this, the preacher looks for 'equivalences for words, characters, and ideas that might translate them from the biblical text into the sermonic text'.[19] This is a text centred approach for when scripture is encoded in this way in a sermon, the clear message is sent that the actual verbal content of scripture – 'what it says' and 'what is in it' – is foundational to the church's life and ministry and not to be taken lightly.[20] Furthermore, this creates a 'mimetic' form of remembering in the church where the church's task is to imitate in the present that found in the scriptures.[21]

There are, however, various approaches to translation, 'literal', 'dynamic equivalence', and 'paraphrase'.[22] The primary approach in these sermons is 'dynamic equivalence'.[23] In this approach, freedom is exercised in looking for equivalences between what is said in the text, and the situation in context, while seeking to remain faithful to the scriptures via metaphor and *re*flection.[24]

All five sermons appear to rest upon and provide examples of dynamic equivalence translation. In sermon 1, there is a move from a more literal application of Jesus words in Luke 12, vv 22 to 32, about not worrying about material needs to not worrying about the Covid-19 situation. In sermon 3, there is a dynamic equivalence move from the exiles building houses and planting gardens to people in isolation finding 'new rhythms' for 'thriving' in the new situation. In sermon 4, the translation is from the weeping of Jesus over the death of Lazarus to our human grief 'in this season' because of things lost. In sermon 5, the significant dynamic equivalence move is from the triumph of the Suffering Servant to the God who can demonstrate power in the suffering of Covid-19.

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[19] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 20.
[20] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 22.
[21] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 23.
[22] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 20-21.
[23] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 20-21.
[24] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 20-23, 23.

Sermon 2 is somewhat different from the others in so far as it is concerned with 'the last days and the Second Coming of Christ'. In a sense, it was explicitly exploring the potential for 'signs' of this event in the scriptures. This suggests a more literal translation approach. Be this as it may, the sermon resists a literal association between specific events in the scriptures and the present. Instead, the primary translation move is dynamic in that the sermon emphasises that whether the present times represent the end times or not, the main thing is 'to be ready'.

Sermon 5 and particularly sermon 3 are also worth further discussion concerning the way in which they adopt a dynamic equivalence approach to negotiate the meaning of the text into the Covid-19 pandemic context. For both, and explicitly sermon 3 are concerned to speak about the presence of God in an exile-like situation. In the scriptures, the exile is an event linked to the actions and judgement of God. However, in neither sermon is Covid-19, the cause of the contextual exile experience, attributed to the judgement of God. This is the case even when sermon 3 explains that the exile of the people of Israel was the result of God's action in response to their persistent unfaithfulness. This emphasis on one part of the scripture text but not on the other is possible precisely because a dynamic equivalency translation allows the freedom to interpret more metaphorically in relation to context. This sort of move in interpretation and application from exile to exile 'like' is, in fact, signposted very clearly in sermon 3.

> Now, even though you and I maybe have not been exiled or picked up militarily and moved to another country, we know what it's like to be in a place where we don't want to be. We know what its like to be in a new place, and to be dealing with a new reality.

This move is significant because it negotiates the distance between the world of the text and the world of the listeners while maintaining the place of scriptural authority to guide faith and practice in a different yet similar context. It is also a move that implies that in dynamic equivalence translation, factors such as context, culture, and other theological convictions play an important part in guiding the interpretation and application of scripture.

The text centred translation approach of these sermons is consistent with them being delivered in congregations that belong to the CBAC. For CBAC members have 'The Responsibility to accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the divinely inspired Word of God and the final authority in matters of faith and practice'.[25] Further, as argued by Stephen Holmes in an earlier edition of this *Journal*, a 'mimetic' approach can be seen as a Baptist way of interpreting scripture.[26] To suggest that there is something Baptist in this approach is also consistent with Gregory's analytical findings in his global anthology of *Baptist Preaching*. He writes that 'Overwhelmingly the preachers in this collection use McClure's code of translation' and 'Most examples in this collection represent dynamic translation'.[27]

As indicated in the introduction to this section McClure indicates a variety of other ways in which scripture can be interpreted in the move from text to application. While these options exist, none of these sermons addressing the Covid-19 situation draw heavily on these other rhetorical strategies. Instead, they all adopt something that can be regarded as a common Baptist way of interpreting the scriptures.

Purpose

In this section, I will discuss the purpose of the five sermons. Purpose relates to Reid's concept of 'voice'.[28] By voice, Reid means the persuasive stance that a preacher takes towards a determined purpose. He calls this the preacher's 'identity'. This identity comprises various assumptions connected to their 'understandings of *the nature of authority* and *the nature of language*'.[29]

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[25] *Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada- General Operating Bylaw*, 2010, 18, https://baptist-atlantic.ca/our-convention/our-governance/governing-documents/general-operating-bylaw/, accessed 27 September 2021.

[26] Stephen Holmes, "Baptist Identity Once More", *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context 3 (2021),* 5-27. Holmes applies this specifically to the New Testament as he argues that the belief in 'the active, direct, Lordship of Jesus over every person and over every local congregation' is a defining Baptist conviction. The extent to which a 'dynamic equivalence' translation approach represents a space for the direct and active word of the living Lord Jesus to be heard in and through preaching is intriguing but beyond the scope of this paper.

[27] Gregory, *Baptist Preaching*, 6.

[28] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 26-30.

[29] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching,* 29, italics original.

According to Reid's typology, preachers either appeal to an external 'corporate truth' commonly held by the community or to an 'individual truth' based upon the listeners understanding of self and desire for transformation.[30] Furthermore, preachers either use language in a 'persuasively determinate' way that presents a particular understanding of the ideas they want the listener to adopt or in a 'persuasively indeterminate' way where they invite ongoing exploration and determination by the listeners of these ideas.[31] Accordingly, the combination of these approaches to authority and language determines the voice and purpose of the sermon.[32]

Reid, therefore, posits four voices.[33] There is the 'Teaching Voice', which, with an appeal to corporate truth in a persuasively determinate way, has the purpose that people will respond, 'Yes! This is what we believe'.[34] There is the 'Encouraging Voice', which, with an appeal to personal truth in a persuasively determinate way, has the purpose that people will respond, 'Lord, may this be so in my life'.[35] There is the 'Sage Voice', which, with an appeal to personal truth in a persuasively indeterminate way, has the purpose that people will say, 'Whoa! What will I do with/make of that?'[36] Finally, there is the 'Testifying Voice', which, with an appeal to corporate truth in a persuasively indeterminate way, has the purpose that people will respond 'Yes! This conversation matters. Let's keep talking'.[37]

As described above, all the five sermons in this study adopt a text-centred dynamic equivalence approach to the scriptures. This text centred approach might suggest that the primary voice in these sermons is likely to be the 'Teaching Voice' with its appeal to corporate truth. This association is the implied correlation found in Gregory's *Baptist Preaching*. Not only does he find that overwhelmingly

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[30] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 24.
[31] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 24-25.
[32] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 24, provides a diagram of his matrix, but what he means by these different terms is best seen in his discussion of the nature of the four voices in the book.
[33] There is a spectrum of possibilities under each voice.
[34] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 37-77.
[35] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 79-118.
[36] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 119-56.
[37] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 157-95.

the sermons reflect the approach of dynamic equivalency translation but that 'In this collection of sermons nearly all of the sermons belong to Reid's teaching voice'.[38]

In contrast, all five sermons in this analysis have the final purpose not of teaching but encouragement, seeking the response, 'Lord, may this be so in my life'. The following statements from near the conclusions in all sermons illustrate this purpose.

> You be responsible. Do what you can do. Trust the outcome to the Lord. Give yourself over into his hands. (Sermon 1)
>
> Prayerfully spend time in it [the Bible], and God will transform you more and more into an attitude of rest and assurance and anticipation and excitement and compulsion to make sure that loved ones and family and friends and neighbors and co-workers will rise with Jesus when he comes as well. (Sermon 2)
>
> In the passages that we looked at here this morning, God gives us an incredible invitation to trust him in this uncertain time. Because he has a plan. (Sermon 3)
>
> Friends, put your trust in Jesus, keep your eyes fixed on him and what he will do, what he is doing even now, so that we can see the goodness of God amongst us and know the love and life of Jesus in all things. Let's close in a word prayer. (Sermon 4)
>
> May God bless you now as you enter into a new week. May you know his peace and his presence, experience it like you never have before and his assurance of his love for us and that he's going to carry us through? (Sermon 5)

All five sermons are concerned that people will be able to actively and existentially respond in 'trust' in the light of the message. This emphasis on people availing themselves of what is offered in the sermons is frequently reinforced in the prayers immediately following the sermons. For example, the prayer accompanying sermon 2 includes the words, 'So, we choose, O God, to place our faith in you. Refresh

[38] Gregory, *Baptist Preaching*, 7.

our love and our adoration of Jesus, even now, and draw us ever close to your own heart, I pray'.

There is teaching in these sermons. However, the main question is which voice or purpose is 'behind the wheel' directing the purpose.[39] I would say that ultimately in all these sermons, the primary desire is 'that listeners will accept the possibilities of transformation identified in the preaching event' or respond to the invitation to 'avail themselves' of the sermon's sacred possibilities.[40] That is, whether determined by their regular style or by the nature of the crisis in context, these various Baptist sermons draw upon a Baptist way of interpreting the scriptures, not with the primary purpose of teaching the congregations but to encourage them to live in this crisis with faith in God with them.

Culture

At the heart of this analysis is the question of how these sermons respond to the cultural impact of Covid-19. This relates to McClure's 'cultural code'. [41] The culture code refers to how the sermon includes cultural expressions and experiences and what this communicates about the perceived understanding of culture in relation to the message. For this code, McClure draws upon and adapts H. Richard Niebuhr's work *Christ and Culture*.[42] From this, he develops four main styles of cultural encoding. These are the 'identification' style in which the preacher fully associates the cultural reference with the message of the Christian faith.[43] The second style is 'dialectical'. This is when the sermon critically associates only some aspects of culture with the Christian faith, avoiding complete identification.[44] The third main style is 'dualist'. This is when culture is viewed as an ordained given in which people live out their lives but is not associated with the meaning

[39] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 32.
[40] Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 97.
[41] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching,* 136-69.
[42] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 143.
[43] McClure*, Four Codes of Preaching*, 143-49.
[44] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching,* 149-58. In his book, he has two sub-categories of 'synthetic' and 'conversionist'. He does not make this distinction in his 2020 video of this code, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtMvJjxA6v8, accessed 26 September 2021. Consequently, neither do I.

of the Christian message.[45] The fourth main style is 'sectarian'. This is when the meaning of the message of the Christian faith is located primarily, if not exclusively, in the life and culture of the Christian community in opposition to broader cultural expressions.[46] Whatever the limitations of Niebuhr's typology and McClure's adaptation of these categories, they allow us to see some of the ways in which the sermons represent culture.

According to McClure, sermons reference culture in various different ways. In keeping with the focus in this paper, however, I will concentrate on three main areas of cultural referencing: the use of technology because of the Covid-19 regulations, the experience of Covid-19, and governmental action.[47]

All five sermons refer to the online nature of the sermon or service. There is no hint in them that using technology to gather online rather than physically is unbiblical and should be resisted. Limitations are acknowledged while they welcome the opportunity to gather together. One preacher stated, 'I know we miss meeting together but thank God for technology where most of us can come together to hear the word of the Lord' (sermon 1). Another expressed their sense of being 'blessed' in belonging to a pastoral team that could 'put into place the various services and livestream and events throughout the week that helps us to keep those communication lines established and open between each age demographic within our church' (sermon 2). In these responses, we see a dialectical response. The technology has limitations, but its positive use overcomes these limitations. Something of the same approach is heard in the introductions of sermons 4 and 5. In sermon 3, however, the positive missional benefits of technology are highlighted in a way that gives it something of an identification reference, 'Invite them to our online Easter service in two weekends. They can come – they don't even have to get dressed or find a parking spot to join us – but invite them to become part of it'. In most sermons, therefore, the technology to broadcast services is seen as

[45] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 158-62.
[46] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching,* 162-66.
[47] McClure affirms the relationship between experience and culture, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 136-37. I will, therefore, discuss people's experiences of C-19 here and return again to how C-19 is viewed theologically in the next section.

offering an experience that is better than no experience but an experience inferior to physical gathering. There are, however, also indications of a benefit beyond the normal in reaching people in the wider community who may not usually gather. This said, the dominant view of the technology which enabled the services to take place is dialectical.

When it comes to people's cultural experiences of the impact of Covid-19, these are variously described negatively in all sermons through such language as 'trial', 'crisis', 'shock', 'uncertainty', 'anxiety and fear'. While these experiences are not unique to people in the congregations, they are taken very seriously as something that the Christian message can address. As such, these sermons do not reflect attitudes of distance that may be associated with the dualist or sectarian perspectives. Instead, in keeping with the above, the general tenor in these sermons in response to Covid-19 is dialectical. The emphasis is that God can work in this context for the good while resisting any idea that the experiences have come from God or are good in themselves (sermons 1, 4, 5). Two of the sermons, however, require some further discussion.

Sermon 2, as a sermon about the signs of the times and the last days, would seem to invite a clear identification between what people were experiencing and the teaching of scripture. This clear identification, however, is resisted.

> And this morning, we – in acknowledging – we don't know when Jesus will return, we don't know the exact time. In fact, Jesus said he didn't know, only the father knew, and so if Jesus doesn't, then you know we should just stop right there trying to figure it out. But the point will be 'to be ready'.

Despite its focus, therefore, there is no explicit claim in this sermon that the crisis indicates that the return of Jesus Christ is imminent. This sermon, therefore, represents culture in a dialectical style rather than identification style, as might be expected from its focus.

The second sermon worth further comment is sermon 3. For this sermon, more than others, highlights positive Covid-19 experiences.

> I've heard stories about people gathering together with their family to do puzzles, people are reading books that they've always wanted to read, and some of us have had New Year's resolutions sitting on a list that we hadn't gotten to, and now we've got time to get to them. This can be a season of living, and this can be a season of thriving because the Lord's love and care and desires for each of us have not changed in this new world order.

At times, therefore, in this sermon, there is a close identification between people's positive experiences and the actions of God as expressed in the sermon. However, this more positive cultural identification style can undoubtedly be explained by the fact that this reflects the positive emphasis found in the sermon's scripture passage, Jeremiah 29:4-13. This accords with McClure's claim that Christian communities will have their cultural perspectives variously shaped by the biblical text.[48] Indeed, we would expect this to be the case, when and where, there is a high view of scriptural authority as in these sermons.

The third particularly interesting area of cultural coding involves the representation of governmental action. In some sermons, there are passing references to government action. In sermons 1, 3, and 5, however, there are direct references.

Only in sermon 3 is there a reference to potential negative perceptions about governmental action. 'We should be praying for our local leaders, our provincial and our national leaders, that God would give them wisdom, even if you see them as your captors and the people who've kind of imprisoned you'. While not stated as the preacher's view, this is a dialectical response.

The references to governmental action in other sermons are different. In these sermons, listeners are actively encouraged to follow the government regulations as part of the message in an identification style.

> Obey the health authorities, all the while knowing that your life is in God's hands. It is well. Do not tempt the Lord your God. Be as

[48] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 140.

> safe as you can. Wash your hands. Keep your distance. And as you pass from six feet away, shout 'It is well'. (Sermon 1)
>
> This is big, and we need to take it very seriously, following all the recommendations and all the directives from our national and provincial leaders. That's wisdom. That's us doing our part. (Sermon 5).

Therefore, concerning governmental action, when and where there are direct references, they are predominately positive. In turn, even where there is critique, the regulations are never portrayed explicitly as restrictions on Christian faith and practice. This is relevant to note given the Baptist commitment to the separation of church and state and religious freedom.[49]

In his global anthology of Baptist sermons, Gregory writes, 'The primary code for sermons in this collection is the dialectical cultural code'.[50] This is also the primary code in these five sermons. However, there are also examples of an identification style at some points.

Theology

To talk about the theology in the sermon is to draw from McClure's 'theo-symbolic code'.[51] This is concerned with how the sermon narrative portrays God as active.[52] This code, therefore, explores how those involved in the action of the sermon relate to one another while resolving or not some sort of conflict. The characters or 'actants' with possible examples in the parenthesis are the 'sender' (God), 'receiver' (humanity and creation), 'object' (goal of the intervention), 'subject' (hero often Jesus), 'helper' (supports hero, eg Spirit, Church), and

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[49] Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).
[50] Gregory, *Baptist Preaching*, 7.
[51] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 93.
[52] Gregory states about this code that 'By common consent this is the highest abstract concept in McClure's system', *Baptist Preaching*, 6. I have stripped it back and, for my understanding of McClure, draw on the notion of the 'Hero's Journey' as a key structural motif in narrative and concentrate on the main characters. This approach seems consistent with McClure's approach.

'opponent' (resists the subject).[53] What this coding reveals is the extent to which the sermon represents God as present but largely unengaged (low-negative style),[54] engaging but not yet fully resolving (high-negative style),[55] establishing an equilibrium (low-positive style),[56] triumphing with a surplus (high-positive style).[57]

In the narrative drama of all five sermons, Covid-19 harms the human receivers and creates negative experiences. God (sender) is portrayed as active and can address these experiences, bringing hope or peace (object). The main subject, the one who can address the situation, is Jesus (primarily in sermons 1, 2, 4, 5) or Godself (sermon 3). The helper who participates in bringing the resolution is more difficult to identify and may include more than one character. However, some of the main ones include the practice of 'faith' (sermon 1), the 'Bible' (sermon 2), the church community (sermon 3), 'love' (sermon 4), 'power' (sermon 5).

In sermons 1, 2, 4 and 5, the primary theology expressed is high-negative. They portray God as engaged in the situation without fully resolving the situation. The sermons do not doubt that the resolution will come, just that it is not yet fully realised in the listeners' experience. This example from sermon 4 indicates this sort of position.

> Jesus is our hope in trouble. When we are facing this difficulty and this pressure, this pain and struggle, Jesus is our hope. He may not be acting in the timeline that we want. He may not be resolving this issue as quickly as we want, but he is there, and he loves us. He is not dispassionate towards us, he is kind, he knows our needs and he is able to do something far greater than we can imagine.

In these high-negative sermons, the sermons base their not-yet positive expectation upon God's acts in the past, not least the death and resurrection of Jesus, or in future eschatological hope.

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[53] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 96-97.
[54] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 105-07.
[55] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 110-13.
[56] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 116-18.
[57] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 121-23.

Sermon 3 again offers a slightly different theological perspective. This sermon indicates a low-positive perspective that God has already restored a sense of 'equilibrium' to people's lives.

> I've started to sense a change in people's conversations. And they're starting to talk about finding new rhythms, finding new ways, and starting to adapt to this new reality that we are all a part of. I've heard great stories about people reconnecting with old friends… connecting with family across the country online…This can be a season of living, and this can be a season of thriving because the Lord's love and care and desires for each of us have not changed in this new world order.

The more positive understanding in this sermon regarding God's present action is consistent with the more positive attitude in this sermon as discussed above towards culture. Likewise, it is again consistent with the content of the scripture preached. McClure again suggests that this is to be expected writing that 'the biblical content introduces certain constraints and limits' as to what is theologically represented in a sermon.[58]

In terms of the Baptist sermons in his anthology, Gregory writes, 'It is difficult to characterise the preacher's theo-symbolic code in any one sermon. There is little unity among the preachers in this collection at the point of this code'.[59] In contrast, these sermons operate primarily with a high-negative style, with really only one sermon moving into the next category of the low-positive style. This commonality may result from the fact that all these sermons addressed the same developing and unresolved situation. Be this as it may, all these sermons affirmed the present action of God and anticipated future redemption.

Language

Sermons are expressed through language, which is organised and structured in a particular way. This relates to McClure's 'semantic code'.[60] Here the focus is not so much on individual words but the

[58] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 102.
[59] Gregory, *Baptist Preaching*, 7.
[60] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 52-92.

meaning expressed in their combination.[61] McClure states the semantic code includes 'sermon's themes, ideas or messages and includes, also the way that these messages are organized into a whole, so it also includes then sermon organization'.[62]

McClure identifies two main styles of semantic coding. The first main style is the 'connotative style'.[63] In this style, the meaning of the language is carried alongside what is said rather than obviously stated. In this style, 'metaphors', 'enigmas', 'image', and 'story', can all come into play.[64] He identifies two substyles of the connotative, the 'artistic' and the 'conversational'. In the artistic style, meaning is often initially hidden and delayed as something to be discovered and revealed.[65] In the conversational style, there is 'movement back and forth among alternative perspectives on a meaning pursued'.[66]

The second main style of sematic coding is the 'denotative style'.[67] This style seeks clarity, avoids ambiguity, and draws upon 'definition and repetition' rather than using 'figures of speech' to communicate precise meaning.[68] If connotative language is meaning in 'motion',[69] denotative is meaning 'arrested'.[70] The first substyle of the denotative style is 'assertive'.[71] In this style, preachers essentially speak as though the meaning they assert is the accepted meaning.[72] The second substyle is the 'defensive' style.[73] In this style, preachers go beyond merely asserting a meaning to supporting claims and challenging opposing views with reference to all kinds of backing 'from Scripture, tradition,

[61] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 53.
[62] McClure, "The Semantic Code", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFOQ_smAzEs, accessed 11 August 2021.
[63] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 61-72.
[64] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 62.
[65] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 63-67.
[66] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 68.
[67] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 72.
[68] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 72.
[69] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 61.
[70] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 73.
[71] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 73-80.
[72] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 76.
[73] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 81-85.

experience, and science.' [74] In this style, the nature of what is being asserted is rationally defended.[75]

As with other codes, there can be some variation within the sermons. This code also invites consideration of individual phrases. Here, however, the primary concern will be with the dominant semantic approach.

Two sermons, 1 and 5, are primarily denotative. They present their ideas as truths to be accepted. The style in 5 is mainly denotative assertive, as illustrated by statements such as, 'Covid-19 is not greater or larger than the power of our great and mighty God who, with a word, created the universe'. In contrast, the style in sermon 1 is more defensive insofar as it draws on examples from scripture and experience such as previous crises and personal health to validate the claims that there are times when our only option is to trust in God.

Two sermons seem to waver between the connotative and denotative styles. Sermon 2 has conversational connotative aspects insofar as the preacher discusses a range of different perspectives on biblical themes relating to the return of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the goal of this reciprocity seems to be the desire to establish denotative clarity that 'we have something glorious and powerful to look forward to'. Therefore, the semantic style appears to be connotative, seeking the denotative. Sermon 4 starts with aspects of the connotative style, both conversational and artistic in so far as there is the sense of exploring an answer to a question, 'Jesus loves them, but why doesn't he respond immediately?' The tension, however, is not held long as the sermon offers the resolution quite quickly after it has posed the question, 'Well, we see that he's got a bigger purpose. He's got some other greater story in mind that we're not aware of'. In turn, while something of a conversational style continues as the sermon explores the passage, it lands with denotative assertive style when it offers four 'points' of application such as, 'He is not dispassionate towards us, he is kind, he knows our needs, and he is able to do something far greater than we can imagine'.

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[74] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 82.
[75] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 83-85.

Sermon 3 has a more evident connotative style. It is a sermon based on the analogy of exile, 'Now, even though you and I maybe have not been exiled or picked up militarily and moved to another country, we know what it's like to be in a place where we don't want to be'. The substyle is conversational as there is a give and take style in the way it expresses ideas and makes claims.

> You know, my conversations with different people…I think initially, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, everybody when into shock, and it was hard for all of us to imagine how life could change so dramatically, so quickly…And I've noticed that in the last few days…I've started to sense a change in people's conversations. And they're starting to talk about finding new rhythms…

This sermon is the most connotative and conversational of all five sermons.

The semantic code is the nearest that we get to a discussion on the sermon's delivery in this type of analysis. Gregory states in his anthology that the 'predominant semantic code in Baptist preaching is denotative-assertive'.[76] In these five sermons, there is greater variety. Indeed, this is the place where there is the greatest rhetorical difference between these individual sermons. They were preached in different styles.

Conclusion

These sermons demonstrate variety in the scriptures chosen, the structures followed, and the styles adopted. Indeed, rhetorically, the semantic code is where the greatest variety between these five sermons is found. No two of them is identical in this regard. To be sure, there is also some variety between these sermons in how they reflected cultural and theological convictions regarding the experiences of Covid-19. Be this as it may, no sermon attributed C-19 to the judgement of God; all sermons posited God as acting on behalf of the listeners. Where the sermons directly addressed governmental regulations, they portrayed

[76] Gregory, *Baptist Preaching*, 6.

these primarily as positive actions in keeping with the message preached, with any critique, very minor.

When and where there were cultural and theological differences between the sermons, such as a more positive perspective on the cultural experience of Covid-19 and God's present action, this can be attributed largely to the tone and timbre of the actual scripture preached. Therefore, these very differences between the sermons point to a more significant commonality between these sermons at the rhetorical level of scripture. For all these sermons adopted a dynamic equivalence translation approach to the scriptures preached which shaped their content. This points to a shared high view of scripture's authority, which pervades the whole sermons as the dominant code. The translation approach to scripture found in these sermons is also consistent with the findings in Gregory's more general analysis of the nature of *Baptist Preaching*.

Further comparison between Gregory's more general conclusions on *Baptist Preaching* and the analysis of these sermons shows other places of similarity and difference. The analysis of these five sermons shows greater variety at the sematic level than Gregory indicates, but similarity to his findings in the largely dialectical cultural code these sermons adopt. In contrast to Gregory's conclusion about the theo-symbolic code being difficult to identify, these sermons demonstrate an identifiable and largely common theological approach with only some slight difference in emphases. However, the most significant difference between the general analysis of Gregory and the analysis of these sermons is that all five have the purpose of encouraging rather than teaching, which he suggests is the common Baptist approach. Again, however, this very difference may rest on a more significant commonality at the level of scripture. For in dynamic equivalency, the goal is to equate scripture and context. All these sermons explicitly seek to do that in a context where people's experiences of uncertainty need to be addressed. In this sense, the purpose of the sermons is consistent with the nature of the scriptural approach.

As highlighted above, therefore, all these sermons adopt a very similar approach to scripture, consistent with their particular CBAC Baptist identity and consistent with the broader Baptist constituency. However, to say this is also to acknowledge that all these sermons

adopt only one approach to scriptural interpretation from among the possible options available. Perhaps this was simply the favoured approach on this day. However, it also means that there was a range of possibilities untapped in the dynamic move from scripture text to sermonic context. The extent to which these other approaches are also legitimately Baptist, promote a mimetic remembering, and maintain a high view of the authority of scripture is an important issue requiring further discussion to recognise and extend the variety of valid options used by and available to Baptist preachers.

In this work, I have used the rhetorical strategies of McClure and Reid to examine the sermons of other people. These strategies, however, were primarily designed to help preachers understand their own rhetorical approaches in terms of their purposes in preaching and the expectations of their listeners. This analysis highlights the contextual approach of one group of Baptist preachers in response to the traumatic experience of Covid-19. This invites the examination of preaching in our contexts, the strategies adopted, and the options available, not least when sermons are spoken into situations of shared identifiable crisis.

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Theology and Ministerial Formation in the Bristol and Baptist Traditions[1]

Nigel G. Wright

Key Words: Baptist, evangelical, Bristol Tradition

It is sometimes claimed by people who have been faced with the prospect of imminent death that 'my whole life flashed before my eyes'. I had something of a similar experience when reading Anthony R. Cross's fine book on ministerial formation entitled, *To communicate clearly you must understand profoundly*.[2] To be sure, to refer to 'imminent death' is entirely inappropriate in that the book is in no way life-threatening, nor at 664 pages in length could anything be described as 'imminent'. But in offering a review of Baptist theological education from its very beginnings the book also offered me personally a review of my own life and of the things that have been important to me ever since as a Mancunian teenager my life underwent a reorientation in a Godward direction, in other words a Christian conversion. Even before that I had developed a shadowy awareness of Baptist theological education when, accompanying my father in the early 1960s on one of our occasional Sunday morning walks through the highways and byways of south Manchester we happened upon a building project that he explained to me was the re-construction of a place where Baptist ministers are trained — the Northern Baptist College. This was interesting but not particularly significant to me at that point, but as is the way with these early chance experiences, its significance came to grow on me and to become as much a part of me as did the urban walking to which I have been addicted ever since.

For sure, when I talk about a life review, the earliest parts of Anthony's book lie well beyond reach of my memory. But as the story progressed, I encountered names and places that reached back into the dawn of my Baptist consciousness, names that I knew by reputation, or

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[1] This article was first given as a lecture at the Community Day for Bristol Baptist College on Wednesday 23rd March 2022 at Westbury-on-Trym Baptist Church.
[2] Anthony R. Cross, *"To communicate simply you must understand profoundly": Preparation for Ministry Among British Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2016).

sometimes people I had encountered tangentially, or then more substantially, or even formatively as some became my teachers. And then slowly I became part of the story, a player in the drama, even an actor bringing some kind of influence, for good or ill, on the lives of others and the course of events. It's an interesting experience to realise that you have passed into history and that things that you said, did or wrote have served to shape the present — and you must take responsibility for them. All in all after reading Anthony's book, and re-reading some of the parallel literature, I am left with a great sense of respect for those who have gone before, those whom I have known along the way, and those who labour in this particular vineyard today.

My own life accompanies a narrative concerning theological and ministerial education that for most of us will be reasonably familiar and aspects of which will be detected in today's conference. When in 1970 having graduated from Leeds University I entered Spurgeon's College to prepare for ministry, the landscape seems, in retrospect, to have been quite uni-dimensional. The mixed bunch embarking on training were almost exclusively male, single and in their early twenties and were embarking upon a course that would last between three and five years and would be predominantly academic. The assumption at the time tended towards the belief, as it did in other spheres such as teaching, that academic achievement was the primary preparation needed for ministry. More practical or denominational subjects took place outside the degree or diploma curriculum and were accompanied by regular availability for preaching, by assistantships in local churches, summer pastorates or, in later parts of the course, student pastorates.

To me, young, inexperienced and lacking Baptist pedigree as I was, all of this was invaluable. To be fair, there was not the assumption that these initial steps would do anything other than lay the foundations for future learning, or, as Dr George Beasley-Murray put it early on, to 'adumbrate' all that was to follow, a word of which at the time I was unaware. The dictionary told me it means 'to foreshadow vaguely'. College years were followed by probationary studies and a relatively informal link to a 'senior friend,' a link that in my case involved one telephone conversation, although probably more in terms of distant observation. I enjoyed those years and undoubtedly gained from them but have never been nostalgic for them. College was residential, semi-monastic, slightly public-school or Oxbridge-college like, closed to

women and older candidates or difficult for them to access. There were things I found distasteful: a degree of competitiveness, an element of testosterone, juvenile raids on other colleges, aggressive football matches, dubious confrontations in sermon class. At the same time there could be fun, genuine fellowship, and friendships, many of which have endured.

However, change was bound to come. The age of entry began to rise from the early twenties to the mid-thirties as more second-career candidates were accepted for training. Financial considerations changed as local authority grants for private colleges became more scarce and loans were introduced. The academic model yielded to a vocational model as the value and quality of practical training was upgraded. Pastoral studies became part of the curriculum as colleges gained more freedom to fashion their own courses and offer them for university accreditation in some form or other. Increasing numbers of women were accepted for training and largely male faculties slowly became more diverse in gender and ethnicity. Of central importance was the accommodation of church-based training with colleges becoming partners of congregations in the formation of ministers, time being equally divided between college and pastorate. This latter development was introduced by the Northern College but gradually the other colleges followed suit to the point where it has become the dominant model for training.[3] Its advantages are considerable in terms of the learning process, reversion to an older Baptist model of learning through apprenticeship, service to churches that may not otherwise have the benefit of consistent ministry – demonstrated increasingly by the frequency with which Ministers in Training stayed on in their pastorates and indeed in more recent modifications to the settlement process. And then there is the shift to more missional ways of thinking, the need to give attention to church-planting or pioneer ministries; and what started out as a specialism for which some in particular were prepared, the realisation has dawned that mission should define all aspects of ministry so that we now speak routinely of 'mission and ministry' as our standard perception of what we are about.

[3] For some of the history see Anthony Clarke, 'How did we end up here? Theological Education as Ministerial Formation in the British Baptist Colleges', *Baptist Quarterly* 46.2 (2015): 69-97.

What strikes me as I review these shifts of emphasis is the degree to which they track changes that have taken place across the denominations, or at least the Protestant ones, and their similarity to parallel shifts in preparation for other professions such as teaching, nursing and medicine. Academic knowledge is essential, but effective practice must go hand in hand with it. Increasingly also we might identify developing denominational expectations and emphases. Witness in this regard the changes in vocabulary from 'education' to 'training' to 'formation'; the character of our ministers is as important as their learning.[4] Their ability to relate to others and to sustain those relationships over time and sometimes to retrieve them from alienation is massively needed. As one regional minister is reputed to have pointed out: 'Not many ministries fail because a minister's knowledge of Greek or Hebrew is not up to scratch but rather because they fail in their relationships with people'. Who we are goes together with what we know and what we can do: head, hand and heart.

It is entirely right for denominational authorities to specify the qualities of ministers who are called to serve in its ranks. So we have been steered in the direction of ministerial competences and towards expectations that training, increasingly known as formation, will include components relating to ethnic diversity and racial justice, to domestic violence, to ecumenical awareness and acquaintance with non-Christian religions. And given that such expectations have increased to require more time for an expanded curriculum, relatively informal patterns of probationary studies have long since been successfully rethought and reapplied on the pathway to full accreditation. Most recently, although arguably belatedly, careful thought and planning has encompassed plans for life-long ministerial development, as it surely must. A culture of life-long learning allied to continuing development is surely to be applauded.

The narrative I have sought to portray is one of gradual and thoughtful evolution. It is hard to say that any of it has been unnecessary and unhelpful. Hopefully it leaves us in a position where those preparing for ministry in our churches are in a better place than ever before, more than ever suited to the task that awaits them. And here we might

[4] See Anthony Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2021).

make firm connections with the 'Bristol Tradition', so-called, that we are recognising and I trust reaffirming today. For this is a tradition that places at its centre and seeks its identity in the provision of 'able, evangelical' ministers or to expand this concept, the notion of a 'learned, godly, able and zealous' ministry.[5] To take that word 'able' seriously is indeed to pay attention to the abilities to be encouraged in those who serve and, negatively stated, to do all we can to ensure that those who are ordained and accredited in ministry do no harm to the lives and churches with which they are entrusted, but rather, and to state it positively, do good and so glorify God and serve the coming of God's kingdom. Competence in a physician of souls is as important as in a physician of the body. And as Paul Goodliff has expounded at length in perhaps the most comprehensive statement about preparation for Baptist ministry,[6] ministers are above all to be virtuous. To be sure anyone who believes they are 'sufficient for these things' and relies on their own ability has hardly begun to understand the nature of ministry. We do not bear fruit by believing that we can do things but by learning that without Christ nothing we do is of worth: 'Without me you can do nothing', said Jesus. There is a real sense in which we are also called to be 'incompetent' when this means recognising our limits, and so being constrained to depend upon God's Spirit.[7] This is no reason to bring less than the best we can to the work of Christ and his church. It is no light thing if by our incompetence we damage the lives of others and cause them to stumble. But such skills as we have need to be ignited by God's Spirit if they are to work the work of God.

A question that begs itself in my own mind is, given all the effort to improve the quality of ministerial formation, where is the evidence that the quality of ministry practised has itself improved and is further improving? More precisely, by what criteria could we possibly evaluate that this is the case? Are our congregations closer to God, more deeply

[5] On the 'Bristol Tradition', see now Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *The Story of Bristol Baptist College* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022); cf. W. Morris West, *The Bristol Tradition: Then and Now* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1987).
[6] Paul W. Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2017).
[7] Ruth Gouldbourne, 'In Praise of Incompetence: Ministerial Formation and the Development of a Rooted Person', in *Truth that Never Dies: The Dr G. R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lectures 2002-2012* edited by Nigel G. Wright (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

informed in faith, more alive in the Spirit, more effective in gathering in the lost, in promoting justice and abounding in love? Or not? Since ministry is not an end in itself but directed towards the building up of the churches, how would we characterise what it means to be a healthy, thriving, wise, resilient Baptist church today that genuinely makes a difference for Christ's sake in a broken world? And could we achieve a denominational consensus on this towards which our individual and corporate efforts could be applied? Our question is not only what does good ministry look like but what should a good Baptist church look like? This would be a piece of work worth attempting, but not today and not on this occasion.

For here my attention must take a turn which I think comes close to our central concern today. There is a question we must inevitably ask. Given the changes that have taken place to our patterns of initial ministerial formation, and given the extra expectations that our developing understandings have inserted into the required curriculum, and given the constraints of time that congregation-based patterns of training force upon us, what has to receive less attention than we have a right to expect? In other words we come full circle and ask whether we now allot insufficient time to specifically biblical and theological studies and are producing ministers whose theological abilities are superficial and thin rather than robust and profound. To arrive at such a state would stand in direct contradiction to the Bristol Tradition in which ministers are to be both able *and* evangelical, that is deeply rooted in an understanding of the gospel and zealous in communicating its riches to believers and non-believers alike.

How do we pay attention to the formation of ministers who are *biblically and theologically educated and learned*, or is this an ideal at which we no longer aim? Are we in danger of becoming a movement that is less than theological served by technicians but not technologists? Now indeed, given that the whole purpose of our calling is to 'know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3), we can never know enough and must always confess ourselves to be beginners. And the question is more than a trivial one since it is from the witness of scripture to Christ that the dynamic that powers every other aspect of ministry must arise; and it is in the formulations of our theology that the significance and logic of biblical revelation are made accessible and persuasive. Without these, every element of our practice

is denuded and disempowered. As Colin Gunton has put it, 'The promise of theology is that its exponents may be enabled to cast light on God's creating and saving love'.[8] There can be few better models for ministry than that provided by the Risen Lord himself when 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' with the disciples later recalling, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us' (Luke 24.27, 32). What an aspiration for the preacher! Acknowledging the genuine promise of theology, we should also confess that there are obstacles in our way over and beyond the problems of getting a quart into a pint pot.

A first obstacle that has been present in the Baptist mind from the beginning and is persistently present today is suspicion of the kind of scholarship that undermines faith and sometimes destroys it. We may be tempted to dismiss such a concern as an expression of anti-intellectualism but should acknowledge that this is a live danger and that studying theology is, and ought to be, dangerous. There is such a thing as the paralysis of analysis. We may all be acquainted with the advice sometimes given to young people not to study theology because it might upset their faith. We might also know of once lively Christians who immersed themselves in theological study only for their Christian discipleship to get lost in the myriad of questions and uncertainties that confronted them and led them to agnostic or even atheistic positions. We could name names in the present world of scholarship, though perhaps fewer than some might imagine. The fact that some Baptists might shift their church allegiances as a result of their encounter with other perspectives may be regrettable but is not, to my mind, particularly disturbing if we accept that there are different ways of being church. But we should also affirm that there is no inevitable link between theological study and loss of spiritual vitality and convinced faith, indeed, the opposite should be the case.

The purpose of study is precisely to question assumptions and prejudices, to distinguish between what has been unthinkingly assumed

[8] Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 53.

or uncritically handed down and what might firmly be grounded in the truth of God. Indeed, it is arguable that all education involves the same kind of process and ought to be at times uncomfortable. We cannot always determine how individuals might navigate this process, although given that all truth is God's truth and is well able to defend itself, we might be confident that it is possible to do so and remain firmly Christian, evangelical, and even Baptist. I dare to say that the Christian faith is questionable at every and any point and that a theological education enables this to be recognised, to cease to fear it and even to find deeper faith through it. There is a pathway that leads from absolutism (it can only be this way) through to relativism (there are different ways of understanding this), through to conviction (this is how I have come to understand this, and here I stand).

Ministers need to have come through this process and to have done so early in their preparation lest at some later point they be taken by surprise by questions they have never asked. Preparation for ministry requires this critical and chastening process, that is to say, the passage from a naïve faith to what has helpfully been called 'the second naivety' (Paul Ricoeur), a place of renewed depth and simplicity that lies beyond the complexity of analytical study. This process is best undertaken in a supportive environment in which those who are familiar with it can support those first encountering it and help to interpret it along the way. Perhaps this is one good reason why our theological colleges should also see themselves as seminaries in which theological study is the handmaiden of a believing church and not an academic end in itself. Socrates was surely right that the unexamined life is not worth living, even when we go on to say with Stanley Hauerwas that the examined life is not a bowl of cherries either.[9] But chiefly in this section we must surely stress that theology, though it is certainly concerned with knowledge is above all concerned with the knowledge of God. It is personal, moral and transformative. For this reason, the great Tom Torrance even in a university context always began each lecture with prayer. For the Christian, and above all for the minister, theology can never be merely academic, an exercise in the study of ideas. It is rightly thought of as spiritual theology. On this, Simon Chan has written, '(A)ll theology is or ought to be spiritual… This reflection is not a disinterested observation but a personal

[9] Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 76.

engagement with God and with God's glory'.[10] The theological teacher's vocation is to embody this and inspire it in others.

A second obstacle is the unfortunate but, again, far from illusory perception that doctrine divides rather than unites, therefore it is best avoided. Behind such a suspicion is a long and dishonourable history in the church of doctrinal conflict shamefully carried through. John Gray is not the only critic to assert that when faith came to be equated with belief, Christianity became according to him, 'the chief source of the doctrinal violence that has ravaged western civilization ever since.'[11] If the present age differs from previous generations, it may be in the more moderate language that we have partially learnt to employ when debating disagreements. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is notable for his insistence that even very divergent views can be debated within the ethos of love.[12] At least, perhaps, we have learnt not to go to war over differences of doctrine. At a more reduced level there have been times in my experience when colleagues have wanted to stake out a 'safe space' for theological discussion perhaps for fear that as they tentatively advanced their own ideas, they might find themselves under attack. Furthermore, we are surrounded by a climate in which diversity, inclusivity and equality are dominant values with the message that we should hold off pointing up differences or ruling anything out of court.

Yet right though this all seems, and popular though this rhetoric might be, not all forms of diversity are compatible with a received identity, and not everything can be included without internal contradiction, and not everything is equal to everything else. There are things worth standing up for. Because the gospel claims to be true, its truth requires defending against teaching judged to be false. There are genuine heresies and pronounced errors to which it would be foolish to be indifferent. Our forebears were clear enough that some things had to be excluded for the sake of those which needed to be included. We have to guard the faith (1 Timothy 6.20). Theology has to be good

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[10] Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 16.
[11] John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 18.
[12] Christopher Landau, *A Theology of Disagreement: New Testament Ethics for Ecclesial Conflicts* (London: SCM, 2020), viii.

theology, faithful to its source and not so manipulable that it can justify anything. The question is how to achieve this without betraying the very faith we are guarding. I am reasonably confident that most if not all of us here have at some time been the victims of the kind of *odium theologicum*, theological hatred, that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. McCarthyism is alive and well and unlovely wherever it is found, even when it is proclaimed as righteousness. In its more aggressive forms, it used to live mainly on the more conservative end of the spectrum, but not exclusively so. In our own tradition the reality of two theologically and once divided denominations, the Generals and the Particulars, gradually and effectively gave way to a new consensus in which the older confessions of faith (useful as they still are in my view, and relatively moderate on both sides) yielded place to agreement in 'those sentiments usually denominated Evangelical',[13] which formula still seems to me to be pretty good.

It connects of course with the idea of 'able and evangelical ministers' valued in the Bristol Tradition and we may refer at this point to the lapidary statement of Caleb Evans, summarising the intentions of his father Principal Hugh Evans, 'as not merely to form substantial scholars but as far as in him lay he was desirous of being made an instrument in God's hand of forming them, able, evangelical, lively, zealous ministers of the Gospel'.[14] If the word 'able' is worth re-affirming, as we have asserted, so is the word 'evangelical'. If the gospel, the evangel, is that 'God has acted in Jesus Christ personally, decisively and universally in such a way that response to his proclaimed story is definitive for the shape of life on earth and beyond',[15] then the maintenance of evangelical identity is a precondition of Baptist identity. I have been struck both in reading the book by Anthony Cross and other parallel accounts of our history, such for instance as the classic book by A.C. Underwood,[16] sometime principal of Rawdon College, just how important and common the assertion of an evangelical identity has been in our history. The challenge is to

[13] Richard Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain,* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996), 13. This was part of the wording of the 1835 Constitution of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.
[14] Caleb Evans, 'Elisha's Exclamation: A Sermon Occasioned by the death of Rev. Hugh Evans, preached at Broadmead, Bristol, April 8, 1781.
[15] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 26.
[16] A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Baptist Union, 1947).

embrace this with the generosity that is implied in the gospel of God's gracious love itself. Colin Gunton's earlier quoted statement stressed the promise of theological study; but he went on to identify its peril: 'Its peril', he says, 'lies in seeking confidently to know too much'.[17] When we claim to know too much, we open the door to a new authoritarianism. And the same is true of those opponents of the Christian faith whose atheistic ideology leaves no room for the humility that a proper scientific methodology demands. If the object of theology is to know the true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, the way we pursue this task, and teach others also to do so, must hold firmly to both the grace and the truth that are revealed and enacted in him (John 1.17).

So, we acknowledge two obstacles in the way to a healthy embrace of theological study. It interests me that whereas our denomination has been quite specific in requiring particular elements in practical ministerial formation, it has had little to say about criteria for either biblical or theological study, other than the formal and modest requirement of a Level 2 qualification and the study of Baptist principles. I am given to believe that at various points discussion has taken place about a contemporary confession of faith that might indicate the material content of a formal qualification but that the enterprise has been either deemed too difficult or too unwise. Just as it would be beneficial to have some specification of what a good Baptist church looks like, so a fuller declaration of the content of faith, of the convictions that most motivate us, could help form the ethos towards which theological education is directed. At the risk of entering this fraught territory, let me make several proposals, broadly conceived, to advance the cause of serious theological engagement combined with a good and right spirit that we might hope could characterise both initial formation and continuing development. And I do this not by constructing an itemised doctrinal statement but by indicating the living traditions of faith and fellowship and theological imagination in which we might wish to stand.

The first is to embrace the term 'generous orthodoxy'[18] and to use it to indicate a wholehearted commitment to the core beliefs of the

[17] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 53.
[18] A phrase first used by Hans Frei, and then by Brian McLaren.

Christian church contained in the ecumenical creeds and reflected in the confessions of faith of early Baptists whilst not falling prey to a narrowness of heart and mind that betrays the one who inspires us. We are participants in a human drama throughout history in which the deity of God is at stake; that is to say human history is a contest of competing ideas, one could say a project, as to the nature and character of the deity, and increasingly as to whether any deity even exists. One might also say that within the Christian movement there is a parallel contest concerning how we are to interpret and balance the variance of representations of God that we find within the scriptures we embrace. As Christians we are heirs to a tradition deeply rooted in scripture and consequent theological formulation that claims to be nearer the truth than other perspectives, whatever their merits might be. Yet our commitment to this tradition should be one that that embodies the generosity of heart that is itself true to the gracious love of the triune God we confess who has hatred toward none but compassion on all that he has made. The depths and riches of this tradition, which trinitarian doctrine serves to integrate, cannot be over-estimated and in it are resources that have the power to excite, nourish and motivate for a lifetime of service and beyond.

The second proposal is that within this 'great tradition' we need to re-embrace the word 'evangelical' and to rescue it from the distortions that it has sometimes undergone either in reality or in the perception of others. To be evangelical is to be authentically Protestant. It is worth remembering that in German the word *evangelisch* is the standard word for churches of the Reformation; *evangelisch-freikirchlich* is the designation for free churches. There is pressure to abandon the word in some quarters because of its association with fundamentalism. Currently in the United States some of the people with whom I would most closely identify are advocating 'after-evangelicalism' because of the close association of some/many evangelicals with Trumpism.[19] Hugely sympathetic as I am to these concerns what is proposed is surely a dead-end, as much so as was the Social Democratic Party previously or the various groups that abandoned the main parties in the last UK parliament. 'Red-letter Christianity', which some propose as a refuge, is never going to make it. There is surely as much good

[19] As an example see David P. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox Press, 2020).

reason to abandon the word 'Baptist' as there is the word 'evangelical' and for the same reasons that are advanced. Some years ago when there was a former debate about 'post-evangelicalism' I made the point that what was needed was not abandonment but faithful re-imagining, and to that position I hold.[20] And it is not as though we lack resources for this as might be suggested by terms such as 'unitive', 'centrist, 'catholic', 'radical', 'open' or 'progressive' evangelical. My own conviction is that our own denomination can represent a certain kind of authentic evangelical faith and that will be my third proposal. But at this point as much as I wish to valorise diversity and inclusivity, it is clear to me that these are not virtues in themselves but only make sense as they are firmly and consistently 'in Christ', the risen Christ. A 'safe place' for our theological explorations is to operate within the capacious boundaries of generous orthodoxy and constructive evangelicalism. A former generation of College principals spoke rightly when in discussing the Declaration of Principle they advocated 'a strong Christ-centred framework of basic convictions directed towards authentic Christian discipleship and mission.'[21] Such a statement leaves open the discussion of which those basic convictions are and how far they extend.[22] Yet without an ethos of firm agreement about such a

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[20] Graham Cray, et al., *The Post-Evangelical Debate* (London: Triangle, 1997), chapter 6.
[21] Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare*, 8.
[22] The Baptist Union appears to have difficulty in coming to a consensus opinion on theological matters, perhaps as a consequence of how it is governed and of the time and patience it requires to embrace theological statements. The widest court of appeal for this activity would need to be the Baptist Union Assembly which raises the question of how easily such a representative body could work with theological ideas and bring them to a conclusion. Perhaps this accounts for some of the nervousness that arises when the issue of a doctrinal basis is raised from time to time. An analogy might however be drawn between the Union and the allegedly unwritten British constitution. Unlike other nations that operate with a written constitution and, say, a penal code, Britain draws upon historic documents such as the Bill of Rights and upon tradition, custom, precedent and both common and statute law. Against the contended claim that Baptists are 'non-credal' it can be pointed out that earlier generations have not been slow to draw up confessions of faith as can be demonstrated by reference to books such as W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959, 1969) or, within Europe, G. Keith Parker*, Baptists in Europe: History and Confessions of Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982). It is also consistently overlooked that the Baptist Union Assembly has overwhelmingly endorsed specific doctrinal statements such as, in 1918, the 'Declaratory Statement of Common Practice and Faith' of the projected Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches of England, later accepted as the doctrinal basis of the Free Church Federal Council in 1940. This rather fine document is laid out in full as Appendix VIII in Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A short history* (London: Carey

basic evangelical heart it seems inevitable that our particular denomination will lose focus and increasingly become a spent force. However, we are as yet far from that point and need never arrive there. Again, the so-called 'Bristol Tradition' has much to offer to the wider 'Baptist tradition.'

So, my third proposal concerns what it means to embody a contemporary and attractive Baptist identity. This is an area that has not been neglected in recent decades. I think we could agree that a maximal reading of Baptist identity places our movement firmly within the great tradition of Christian faith and locates our distinctive convictions as products of our prior understanding of essential Christianity. It is a mistake to detach Baptist identity from the prior theological witness to a God who sets us free that gives rise to it. You may have heard the story of the Mennonite Brethren movement. One particular analysis goes like this: the first generation believed and proclaimed the gospel and thought that there were certain social entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel and advocated the entailments. The third generation denied the gospel and all that were left were the entailments. The fourth generation lost even the entailments because they had lost the gospel. The moral is that our theology cannot afford to be assumed, nor can it exist independently of all that theologically goes before. A healthy Baptist identity requires a lively theological awareness of the whole Christian story. Without it, it will atrophy. My contention is that Baptist identity comprehends both evangelical and liberal dynamics, yet this is liable to distortion if the word 'liberal' becomes detached from the word 'evangelical'. We promote a gospel liberty that affirms that 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5.1).

To illustrate the point, I turn to an unusual source and that is the Anglican theologian Theo Hobson, who might accurately be described

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Kingsgate, 1959), 275-78). Furthermore, in the wake of the Christological controversy of the early 1970s the Assembly massively agreed, 'In particular we assert the unacceptability of any interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ our Lord which would obscure or deny the fundamental tenet of the Christian faith that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, truly God and truly Man' as in Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005), 381. These decisions have never been withdrawn or superseded.

as a 'post-Anglican' because of his trenchant assaults on establishment. In his book *Reinventing Liberal Christianity*, Hobson makes a crucial distinction between good liberalism and bad liberalism. Good liberalism he traces back to what he calls the 'fragile resistance' movements of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century and the emerging philosophy of the Baptist (and later Quaker) Roger Williams, the English founder of the state of Rhode Island from 1644. 1644 might sound familiar to us for other reasons but that year also saw the publication by John Milton, reckoned as England's finest poet after Shakespeare, of his prose work *Areopagitica*, an example of Milton's 'persistent radicalism'[23] in England's revolutionary age. Although he never joined a Baptist church Milton rejected infant baptism, was opposed to a state church and civil interference in matters of religious belief and preferred congregationalism as a form of church government. On his death, his third wife joined the Baptist church in Nantwich, in whose successor congregation I am occasionally known to preach, and remained part of it until her death.[24] According to Hobson, Milton's argument surpassed that of others in proffering (to England) a positive rationale which allowed the state the privilege of promoting a new ideology that inverted the old policy of imposing religious uniformity in favour of defending religious liberty.[25]

Here indeed we have a reformation of the Reformation even if it took some centuries to achieve its goals. This is the 'good liberalism' of which Baptists are both progenitors and heirs and that is an essential aspect of Baptist identity. According to Hobson it is not to be identified with 'bad liberalism' which is the persistent attempt to reduce Christianity to a form of religious humanism by stripping it of precisely that offensive content that turns out to be in effect the 'power of God for salvation'. Hobson's further proposals for sustaining this may not be ours (or mine), but his argument at the very least plays into my argument, which is that true liberty must be evangelical liberty, inspired by and rooted in a firm articulation of the gospel.

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[23] Theo Hobson, *Reinventing Liberal Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 62.
[24] Underwood, *A History of English Baptists*, 67-68.
[25] Hobson develops his argument at length in *Milton's Vision: The Birth of Christian Liberty* (London: Continuum, 2008). Hobson's previous book, *Against Establishment: An Anglican Polemic* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003) establishes his reputation as a 'post-Anglican.'

These three coordinates, generous orthodoxy, constructive evangelicalism and a contemporary Baptist identity as both evangelical and liberal, form for me the boundaries within which our theological endeavours should fall, the safe space for our theological imaginings. The history of Bristol Baptist College should be a reminder of the crucial role of our seminaries in pursuing these goals. Yet if it begins with them, it does not end with them. Is it too pious a wish to hope that our denominational leaders and regional ministers might be appointed not least with the criterion of theological capacity in view, able to lead and inspire out of a deep theological understanding? To be a theologically literate and excited denomination is not beyond our grasp.

Once more I find myself indebted to Anthony Cross's work of recovery in *To communicate simply you must understand profoundly'* for he recalls of Dr Leonard Champion, President of Bristol Baptist College (1953-1972) and of the Baptist Union in 1964, that 'Champion's great strength lay in his advocacy of the importance of theology, not just for the ministry, but for the health of the denomination and the church in general'.[26] His concern in this respect surfaced in a lecture in 1961 to a Denominational Conference then being held in which he is alleged (by Roger Hayden) to have referred to Baptists as living in a 'theological slum', (a term he later denied having used) and called 'for more and deeper theological thought and study'.[27] Of particular significance was a Baptist Historical Society lecture delivered in 1979 at the Baptist Union Assembly and later published in the *Baptist Quarterly* entitled 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life'.[28] In this he draw attention to the renewal of theological perspective associated with evangelical Calvinism between 1775 and 1825 leading in turn to the revitalisation of Baptist structures. He advocated a return to these theological distinctives with a view to their re-expression in the contemporary context with an aim once more, to the renewal of denominational structures. There is much in that lecture that I could cheerfully plagiarise for today's occasion. Specifically Dr Champion argued, 'I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new

[26] Cross, *'To Communicate Simply'*, 284.
[27] Cross, *'To Communicate Simply'*, 284.
[28] L. G. Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', *Baptist Quarterly* 28.5 (January 1980), 196-208.

structures of church life as an effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present.' Within this he urged further reflection on the sovereignty of God and the saving activity of God in Christ and through the Spirit.[29] It is my firm conviction, along with that of Dr Champion if I understand him aright, that no other constructive possibility is available to us that will readily receive the embrace of the great majority of Baptist people *than a constant re-appropriation of our evangelical identity as I have tried to indicate.*

Let me draw to a conclusion by pointing to the good and inspiring examples of two of the twentieth century's most influential theologians. The first is Jürgen Moltmann (b 1926) whom I find to be inspiring not least because of his regular biographical references to his own conversion experience. He refers to this again in the introduction to his final so-called 'systematic contribution to theology', *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*.[30] As an unwilling soldier in the German Wehrmacht he was taken prisoner at the end of World War II. In a camp in Belgium he was given a Bible by an American chaplain and began to read it for the first time. Through it he found life and hope and went on to study theology as a POW in a camp in Norton near Mansfield set aside for that purpose by the YMCA. He writes, 'Since the moment when I began to study theology . . . everything theological has been for me marvellously new . . . Right down to the present-day theology has continued to be for me a tremendous adventure . . . If I have a theological virtue at all, then it is one that has never hitherto been recognized as such: curiosity'. I particularly identified with his words, 'At a time when so many colleagues are concerned solely with questions of method, what interests me are theological ideas'. All who are acquainted with Moltmann's work can perhaps recognise this excitement even if they believe that sometimes he speculates further than divine revelation entitles him to do. He himself acknowledges the danger 'always to surf theologically on the last wave of the *Zeitgeist'*.[31]

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[29] Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism', 206-207.
[30] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (ET, London: SCM, 1996). See also Moltmann's autobiography, *A Broad Place* (London: SCM, 2007).
[31] Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 263.

But such excitement about the ever-glorious God seems to me to be where we want to be — in the lecture room, and in the study, and in the pulpit, and in the small group — excitement in the ideas that belief in the God of the gospel provokes within us.

And Moltmann's slightly disparaging comment about the practitioners of 'theological method' suggest our second exemplar. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that he had in mind his contemporary Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014) who was massively concerned with theological method and its interaction with all those other methods that are part of the human search for understanding. At about the age of sixteen on returning from a music lesson he had an intensely religious experience he later called his 'light experience'. Seeking to understand it, he began to search through the works of great philosophers and religious thinkers which resulted in his self-described 'intellectual conversion', in which he concluded that Christianity was the best available religious option. This propelled him into his vocation as a theologian and as such an overriding concern was to demonstrate that Christianity is above all *true*. As he puts it in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, '(D)ogmatics may not presuppose the divine truth which the Christian doctrinal tradition claims. Theology has to present, test, and if possible confirm the claim. It must treat it, however, as an open question and not decide it in advance. Its concern must be that in the course of all its thinking and arguments the rightness of the claim is at issue'.[32] God, as Pannenberg frequently repeats, is the 'all-determining reality' (*die alles bestimmende Wirchlichkeit*) and as such alone makes sense of everything that is and can reasonably be shown to do so even if the final verification of its truth must await the eschaton.

This also seems to me to be a word for today. Theology should excite as per Moltmann, but it should also make sense of the way things are and persuade. This is particularly so in an age when the common assumption that Christianity is not true, that, for instance, 'science has disproved all that', keeps people at such a distance that they never discover for themselves the riches of Christian belief. How do we fashion a Christian ministry that is adequate for this dual challenge of the inspiration of theological ideas and the ability to persuade? The lucid proclamation of the Christian faith, it is sometimes said, is the

[32] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (ET, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 50.

most effective form of apologetic. It lies in the effective articulation of Christian ideas, letting them speak for themselves and do their work in people's mind and heart.

In both the Bristol Tradition and the Baptist traditions we should continue to aspire to be able and evangelical, even learned, godly and zealous, that along with others we may fight the good fight of faith.

Note on the Author

Nigel Wright was Principal of Spurgeon's College, 2000-2013 and President of the Baptist Union 2002-2003. He has written numerous books, including *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Paternoster, 2005).

A Profession of Faith? Professionalism in Baptist Ministry[1]

Lisa Kerry

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore Baptist attitudes to professionalism in ministry in both historical and current thought. It will describe some of the challenges posed by a professionalisation of Baptist ministry and some of the benefits. It will then argue for a 'nurturing professionalism' and 'secure professional identity' in Baptist practice which can benefit ministers, congregations and society at large.

Key Words: professional, Baptist ministry, training, formation

This paper is part of a wider study into professional identity in Baptist ministry and the potential benefits of standardising certain aspects of formation. It arises from a desire for a more secure learning environment for Baptist ministers to develop their skills and teach each other.

To begin a paper on professionalism it is helpful to explore what we mean by this term. A dictionary definition has three strands to it:

> – the high standard that you expect from a person who is well trained in a particular job
> – great skill and ability
> – the practice of using professional players in sport[2]

This definition implies that a professional person has had some sort of specialised training, and that they are paid for the role they play in society. For a more nuanced understanding of what professionals represent for us in society at large Schon suggests that professionals and their specialist knowledge have been essential to the progress of society, despite the fact that society has begun to question the rights

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[1] A version of this paper was first presented at Theology Live, Friday 28th January 2022.
[2] https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com.

and legitimacy of those professional groups to make decision on our behalf.[3]

Another essential aspect of professional behaviour might be the ability to keep learning in the presence of continued experience — we would not expect the professionals in our lives to experience one body of knowledge and then never learn again. Indeed some idea of keeping up to date and reflecting on that knowledge would be part of what we would expect from any professional person. Kolb explores this in great detail in a way that has been significant for many professional groups.[4]

We might want to add that society expects certain levels of behaviour from professional people. Professional sports people are expected to behave in a way that honours their sport and other professionals in a way that behoves their place as respected people in society. Baptists have standards that churches have always demanded from their ministers, albeit some of those have changed over the centuries: I can't remember anyone being thrown off the list of accredited ministers recently for encouraging dancing or cock-fighting.[5] The former two aspects (training and remuneration) have historically caused us a few more problems. From the beginning Baptists have struggled with the idea that ministers can be trained or educated at all,[6] seeking to give at least as much kudos to the gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit to an individual called into ministry as the skills they could accumulate in college. Indeed our dissenting roots give us reason to cling to an idea of ministry that frees us from the ties of establishment and class. Choosing to appoint our clergy from within the body of the church, a church of believers who have put themselves at risk to be part of this body of Christ, was always going to lead to a mistrust of outside influences.[7] At a time when clergy and even evangelists were paid for

[3] Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Basic Books, 1991), 3-5.
[4] David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (2nd Ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2015), 61-64.
[5] Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1986),30.
[6] Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 39.
[7] B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century,* (Rev. Ed.; Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 12.

by the state via a system of compulsory tithes,[8] calling one's own ministers and guarding that neutrality from the state must have seemed necessary and worth protecting.[9] So, supporting ministers with education and finance was the subject of much debate among General Baptists, until, in 1702 the General Association made plans to establish an Academy. However, the uneducated state of Baptist ministers was still a problem towards the end of that century. As Anthony R. Cross highlighted, for ministers to be 'useful' to their congregations and the communities they found themselves in, they needed to be educated, trained and free to make it their main occupation.[10] While a general education is something we can now take as given for anyone in Baptist ministerial formation, the need for specific skills and training to be 'useful' to the church remains, as over two centuries later the 'professional' qualities of competence and integrity are still being argued for by Paul Goodliff in his work, *Shaped for Service*: 'The "good minister" is both proficient at the tasks of their calling, and righteous in their living'.[11] Later he suggests that these core tasks of our calling form the central theme to the 'fugue' of our ministry life. Is there something about these core tasks that we are expected to be proficient in that mark us out as professionals?

It seems that Baptists still recognise the need to affirm the traits of professionalism but for very good historical reasons we are reluctant to use the word to describe what we expect of our ministers. The rise of ministry as a profession in the nineteenth century brought with it status and a distinction from the people ministers were trained to care for. Professionalism in ministry was seen as desire to make ministry more allied to other public roles and to expect some of the perks and protections that those roles provided.[12] This doesn't sit comfortably with Baptist understanding of the priesthood of all believers.[13] However, in seeking to distance ourselves from a privileged and

[8] White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century,* 25.
[9] White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century,* 70.
[10] Anthony R. Cross, *Communicate Simply You Must Understand Profoundly: Preparation for Ministry Among British Baptists,* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2016), 85.
[11] Paul W. Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 13.
[12] Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1980), 10-11, 32.
[13] Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 42-43.

socially advantageous expression of ministry we may have lost something vital in the way we train and nurture Baptist ministers.

Professionalism means many things to many people. In my experience as a nurse it could be a bridge to build relationship on rather than a wall to hide behind and it is this idea of professionalism that I want to apply to Baptist ministry. In this article I shall explore the contrast between my training as a nurse and that of a Baptist minister. Although nurse training has changed considerably since, I think that my experience still has a voice that challenges the way we train Baptist ministers today.

So let me declare my auto-ethnographical position. Before becoming a minister I was a nurse in the NHS for over twenty years. My training and subsequent development as a health professional had key aspects which shaped the person I became in that role. From the beginning of my training we were taught that our uniform meant something — we wore it with pride and were expected to behave in certain ways while wearing it. In the East End of London in the 1980s it even conferred some kind of protection, because of the esteem in which nurses were held by the local criminal underworld. We were also taught that part of being a health professional was the ability to pass on skills and competencies to others and to be honest about our own skill deficits.[14] When I first stepped onto an acute medical ward at the beginning of my training I was hopelessly ill-equipped and there were times when this felt dangerous and frightening, but there was always the professional safety net of being required to flag up when I was not competent in a certain area of care. This was all vital to the safety and confidence of the patient and their family.

In December 1986 I sat down with my ward sister for the first assessment of my practical skills as a student nurse. I was at the beginning of my training at the London Hospital, and I had completed my first month. This was an acute medical ward with a mixture of general medical patients, mainly with chest complaints, but it was also the East End so there was a fair percentage with active tuberculosis. The other half of the beds were given to haematology patients who

[14] Nursing and Midwifery Council, *The Code, Professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses, midwives and nursing associates,* 10.

were mostly acutely ill cancer patients with lymphomas, leukaemias and other life-threatening conditions. The latter were all receiving aggressive chemotherapy and in various stages of immuno-suppression. Apart from being an infection control disaster, this was a terrifying place to work, with the junior doctors often in tears with sheer exhaustion and the overwhelming experience of young patients dying regularly. The first death I observed was a sixteen-year-old boy who died with only nurses with him because his family were too poor to keep making the journey into the hospital. This was an intense first experience of the NHS and I felt woefully unprepared and inadequate.

I remember very clearly being very anxious about my assessment. This was not because the ward sister bore any relation to the stereotypical dragons portrayed in films. She was young, very approachable and had been incredibly supportive. I was anxious because I was very aware that as a naïve eighteen-year-old I was totally ill-equipped to provide the kind of care that these people, facing terrible futures and often horrible deaths, needed.

The tool that the London Hospital used for assessing student nurses at that time was Behaviour Assessment Rating Scales.[15] As I sat down with the ward sister in the office my expectations of my score were not high. I had to start at the bottom. However, to my amazement, the ward sister placed me at three from the top in all areas, explaining that she needed to leave space to show that I had improved by the end of the thirteen-week placement. She went on to tell me that despite my abject terror on seeing the extreme circumstances my patients found themselves in, and my young age, she felt that I had demonstrated a natural aptitude for caring which had covered my lack of experience. Looking back I wonder if the reflective practitioner in me was born in that interview.[16] The encouragement and support of that ward sister was a seminal moment in my training and one I have never forgotten — it was not always like this. I was given opportunities to learn and as a result grew in experience and confidence. Over thirty years later I can still remember those patients names and how they died. It led me into

[15] B.A.R.S as they were known were used as a way of assessing student nurses practical skills alongside the more academic assessment of exams and essays.
[16] R. Richardson, 'Humpty Dumpty Reflection, Reflective Nursing Practice', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 21 (1995): 1044-1050.

a career of over twenty years, many of which were spent with the dying and those with cancer.

I often reflect on that experience and wonder what it was that ward sister saw in my eighteen-year-old self. There was some competence, as well as a massive gap in skills, which I spent the next three years learning and the next eighteen developing. Despite my lack of experience I was wise enough to know when to ask for help, sometimes from the patients themselves, who were experts in their own conditions. I perhaps had some natural ability to meet needs in a sensitive way even if I lacked the technical knowledge. This kept me and my vulnerable patients safe. But it also gave me the confidence and courage to learn and a very real awareness of my lack of competence in so many areas. Training in those days was a multi-disciplinary experience. In a training hospital you would learn from any of the other student nurses who had more experience than you. I would ask the doctors and later on the junior doctors would ask me as a staff nurse. Sharing knowledge was part of the culture.[17]

My initiation into ministerial training was not as clear-cut. I was shocked at the outset to be allowed effectively to serve as a minister and perform key pastoral tasks without any direct supervision by someone more qualified. While the things I was doing were not life-threatening like the tasks I had learned as a nurse, they still had the potential to bring emotional and spiritual damage if done badly. In contrast to my early days as a student nurse, no one was checking what I was doing.

As I look back on fourteen years of experience as a Baptist minister, how would I describe my competence now? Is it just an accumulation of years of just getting on with it or has something more organised and helpful occurred? After two years of Equipped to Minister[18] my most profound conclusion was that I was not equipped at all. This is not to criticise the course. As a helpful guide to those who would long to be more adept and nuanced at leading in their local church it was

[17] Nursing and Midwifery Council, *The Code, Professional standards of practice and behaviour for Nurses, Midwives and Nursing Associates,* 10.
[18] Equipped to Minister is the Lay Pastor and Preacher training provided by Spurgeon's College over 12 modules, taught on Saturdays.

wonderful. But it seemed to assume that something organised was happening at the coal-face of ministry that for me just wasn't. I went straight from that course to begin my ministerial training and many of the gaps in my competence began to be filled. However there was still only so much college could do in two days per week and our reflection groups were filled with stories of us all ministering out of a deficit of knowledge and experience. We were helping each other and of course our tutors were available, approachable and wise — but they were not there when we led that funeral or did our first wedding. I looked back on my NHS experience of 'see one, do one, teach one' as halcyon days of practical training compared with the way I was being formed as a Baptist minister. I must admit to having something of an advantage in some areas. The hospital and visiting the sick and dying was the one area I felt very comfortable and competent, but for my friends this was a huge area of anxiety. As I moved through my career I was blessed to have some wonderful role models, and their competence was obvious and demonstrated what I was striving for. I was able to see what it looked like and find my own version of it in a safe and supportive environment, but shouldn't all Ministers in Training have that?[19]

As is often the case, competence was something I was very aware of when it was missing, and which became less of an issue as I became unconsciously competent in most areas of ministry. As I gained experience in the key skills of ministry, leading people through birth, marriage, illness and death, as well as the pastoral journey of their lives, punctuated with the liturgical year and regular gathering around the Lord's table, I began to feel that sense of competence that had grown in my nursing career. In my Newly Accredited Minister years I kept studying as I felt I had gaps in my knowledge and was blessed with a wonderful mentor. My competence grew into a more expert and professional ability that freed me to concentrate even more on the people I was ministering to. Acknowledging that there is no short cut to this, nevertheless I would often look back from this place of competence with more anxiety about my ministerial training than I had had about my nursing training. In my NHS experience I was not allowed to do things that were ahead of my level of competence. I didn't give out drugs alone until I was qualified. I didn't give intravenous drugs until I had done a two-day course and passed an

[19] Goodliff, *Shaped for Service*, 46.

exam; I didn't administer chemotherapy until I had done a hospital-based course, an exam and a degree module. In contrast my first funeral and wedding were completely unassessed.

This has always troubled me, and while I am well aware that each experience of ministry formation is unique and that some, including myself later in my training, are blessed to have been supervised by some very conscientious and experienced ministers, this is not something we standardise for those training to become Baptist ministers. Professional standards in the key tasks of ministry: birth, marriage, death, and the sacraments in between, are taught but not observed regularly in practice.

Anthony Clarke's 2021 book, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders?* has some very helpful insights into the variety of approaches to Baptist ministry formation in our colleges. His Venn diagram depicting preparation for Baptist ministry was interesting to me in what it leaves out as much as what it defines.[20]

When I first came across this diagram it seemed to articulate well my experience of formation and subsequent development as a minister. As I continued through my training, I remember feeling that with the help of the college, that I was moving towards what Clarke depicts as the

[20]Anthony Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges,* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2021), 50. I have added the word 'professionalism.'

centre of the diagram and feeling more and more at ease with my new role. But what also struck me about this diagram was that the centre had been left empty. For me this blank space was the natural home for 'professionalism', although Clarke would argue something different. In fact he would rather we avoided use of the language of profession at all:

> While professional language itself can be carefully nuanced and although the intended emphasis of professional may be on the way that the practice of ministry is accomplished — that is, well, thoroughly, competently, not in a slapdash way — an unavoidable aspect of professional language is the implied distinction and separation between those who are professional and those who are not.[21]

Moreover, Clarke goes on to say that this kind of distinction, rather than being therapeutic, actually undermines any dialectical model of ministry. I would also want to challenge this view of professional distinction. There are times in all of our lives when what we need is expert help rather than equal dialogue, but perhaps more commonly what we all need is a professional person who is confident and comfortable enough in their own skin to wear that professionalism lightly and humbly. In this guise the professional not only brings help but also maintains the dialectical model of ministry where we all learn together. In fact this ease and humility in expertise may be the very thing that, for me, marks out the true professional. I would argue not for a privileged and aloof status beyond the people we are called to serve, but rather a place where calling, spiritual development and the hard work of learning skills converged to form a professional persona. This persona is free to be unconsciously competent and skilled in the areas of ministerial life so that instead of being consumed with the thoughts of how to do a certain thing or behave a certain way, the professionally competent minister is free to be attentive to what the Holy Spirit might be saying in those same situations; to be free to engage in a spirituality of presence being fully present to the other person.

In a helpful description, Osmer outlines an ability of the congregational leader or minister fully to attend to the otherness and

[21] Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders?,* 142.

pain of the person they are with and what God might be saying in the midst of that pain and suffering.[22] A similar idea was encouraged throughout my nursing training, where we aimed as practitioners to become 'unconsciously competent' in basic nursing tasks so that we were able to tune into the patient and their experience and emotional needs. The skill was only one facet of the interaction between patient and nurse, but it was vital that the skill was there as part of the transaction or relationship. Focusing on the skill alone will minimise that relationship but holding the skill as a part of the relationship can be liberating.[23]

Of course, setting professionalism as a goal of ministry formation in this very deliberate way does not give a standardised blueprint for what that professionalism should look like. Ronald Osborn describes the North American phenomena of a changing picture of ministerial professionalism.[24] He offers the images of master, builder, pastoral director, manager and therapist as ways of understanding how, over the centuries, ministry has formed its professional identity in response to the needs of society. In a largely uneducated, pre-industrial world the minister was a master and educator; when education and social mobility became part of the congregation's experience building new congregations and a pioneer mentality seemed to be the pattern of the professional minister, mirroring the pioneering spirit of the secular society it served.

In a British perspective, Russell describes how the clergy became more focused in their roles during the industrial revolution, as other professions took over some of the areas previously dominated by the church.[25] In more recent times we can perhaps all recognise the mantle of spiritual director, manager and therapist. These roles have perhaps contributed to our confusion about our identity as professionals. They appear to be more of a reaction to the secular world than a conscious decision on our part as ministers. In identifying with other professional

[22] Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 33-34.
[23] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 221.
[24] Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1985), 15-16.
[25] Russell, *The Clerical Profession*, 38.

models we have, in my view, brought more confusion than clarity to the concept of professional ministers.

The suggestion that there have been three dominant models of spiritual leadership or ministry in the past seventy years — pastoral director, shepherd and spiritual guide — is made by Michael Jinkins.[26] The pastoral director model seeks to build up and equip the church, emphasising the theology of the priesthood of all believers. The shepherd presents a more traditional and biblical model which sees the church as body or organisation that needs drawing together, communicating with and standing with in good times and suffering. Finally, the spiritual guide seeks to live out the presence of the Holy Spirit in a way that brings life to the church. As all of these models present different ways of being a minister, and all of them may legitimately inhabit the professional ideal, understanding where we stand as a minister ourselves and where our churches stand in relation to these three possible models can help us to find places of mutual understanding with the church of that professional persona.

To add to an already complex picture, Barbara McClure argues that our attitude to pastoral care in our churches has changed perceptibly in the past thirty years in response to some of these concerns.[27] She suggests that the image of the professional caregiver or shepherd model has now been replaced by a much more egalitarian model of community care for each other, communal-contextual pastoral care. This model of care, as well as bringing a much keener sense of public and community response to pastoral care situations, also challenges the power relationship that the shepherd model brings. But most of us recognise that in a context where community members care for each other are there still situations that require the skilled accompaniment of a professional minister and this 'triage' approach can create a bigger divide between the ordained and non-ordained pastoral carer.

Echoing some of those anxieties, Eugene Peterson expresses a deep concern about the professionalisation of ministry in America in his

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[26] Michael Jinkins, 'Religious Leadership' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* edited by Bonnie J. Miler- McLemore, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 312.
[27] Barbara McClure, 'Pastoral Care' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* edited by Bonnie J. Miler- McLemore, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 275-77.

memoir, *The Pastor*. In the closing chapter he describes some of his concerns in a letter to a younger pastor:

> Here's a Psalm phrase that has given me some helpful clarity in the midst of murkiness: 'Blessed is the man who makes Yahweh his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false Gods' (Ps. 40:4) The 'proud' for me in this context are those pastors who look like they 'know what they are doing' — who are competent and recognized as such, who have an honoured position in society and among their colleagues. And 'going astray after false gods' amounts to living in response to something manageable, turning my vocation into a depersonalised job that I can get good at.[28]

The risk of this kind of self-confidence and lack of vulnerability is certainly an unattractive downside to any professionalism, but whether competence in the main areas of ministry necessarily leads to this kind of attitude is an assumption that demands a robust critique. I think that Peterson voices a fear we as English Baptists have had for centuries: that any kind of professionalisation of ministry leads to an unhelpful self- sufficiency rather than a vulnerable reliance on the Holy Spirit. This was certainly a fear voiced in the eighteenth century when training ministers became a crucial issue for English Baptists.[29] The fear that becoming competent would bypass the work of the Holy Spirit can still be detected in Peterson's words. The idea that competence and professionalism throws up some sort of barrier between a minister and the people they serve is also implied. Where professionalism merely becomes the distinction between one who knows something and the rest who don't it is indeed an unhelpful one as William Willimon asserts.[30] And yet, the very distance and depersonalisation that Peterson deplores may sometimes be what is needed as Nigel Wright explains:

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[28] Eugene H Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 315-16.
[29] Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 124.
[30] William H. Willimon, *Calling & Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 32.

> At a painful funeral of a loved person it does not help those who grieve if ministers give way to their own grief. For the sake of everybody 'getting through' they should command their own emotions and be 'professional'.[31]

This tension between being approachable and walking with people through their life events, and yet holding a place that is set apart is, I believe, at the heart of our difficulty with professionalism in ministry. It lies behind the need to be competent and yet also fully reliant on the Holy Spirit and perhaps explains why in comparison with other caring professions we invest so little in 'in-field' training and supervision. Are we afraid of interrupting what the Holy Spirit might do by supervising practical learning and training?

At the end of my Registered General Nurse training a third of my final examination was devoted to the teaching and assessing of others, and before I could take up my ward sister's post I had to complete a degree module in teaching and assessing nurses and healthcare assistants. In contrast I do not remember receiving any teaching at college on how to pass on my skills as a minister to any future Ministers in Training I might supervise. My own training was an inconsistent experience of some exemplary and some non-existent and even damaging supervision. This kind of inconsistency does not help us to produce good ministers. In an era when time at college is getting squeezed into one day a week for most ministers in training, how we support and train those ministers in their churches is more important than ever.

This disparity and confusion around professionalism and the potential benefits of embracing our own form of professionalism in Baptist ministry is what has prompted my research. I hope and pray that this project will lead towards a kinder, more supportive form of professionalism. I believe that this will most likely require the denomination to look again at some kind of standardisation of training within the different formation paths offered by our Baptist colleges. It will perhaps be helpful to look more closely at other professions and their ability to support and train in the field, and how we can better equip experienced ministers to supervise and encourage ministers in training. But I believe we also need to look again at our professional

[31] Nigel G. Wright, *How to Be a Church Minister* (Oxford: BRF, 2018), 18.

identity as Baptist ministers; to willingly take on certain traits of professionalism that might make us more secure and improve the quality of our practice in the church and the world at large. I have four suggestions.

1. Supporting each other in intentional lifelong learning communities

A key issue in learning in any profession is whether the learning environment is safe: safe to make mistakes, safe to ask questions, safe to grow. While there has always been a muted acceptance that ministers need to commit to lifelong learning, until recently (with the instigation of the Continuous Ministerial Development programme), this has not had an organised structure. Now, with the beginning of supportive peer relationships in our commitment to lifelong learning we have an opportunity to grow our professional confidence. Being able to flag up areas that we are less experienced and confident in is the first step towards sharing skills and knowledge and can only benefit our ministers and churches.

2. Standardising training for key events in ministry

While standardisation can be restrictive it can also be liberating. Providing a standardised way of carrying out ministerial recognition interviews has been a positive experience for my Baptist Association and means that we do at least have an explicit expectation of what that process should involve across the denomination. As the key moments in ministry still provide the moments when we are most on show to the world, infant dedications, marriages and funerals, would it not be wise to ensure that a basic understanding and standard of ministry was taught and assessed by all Baptist colleges and followed through into the churches themselves? These key moments can, if done well, be helpful missional opportunities. Why would we not invest in making sure we all do them well? I cannot believe that it would it be that hard to devise a model of assessment for such moments that would give guidance and confidence to the Minister in Training and protect the public from well-meaning but ill-equipped ministers.

3. Providing support and assessment of those key tasks in the field

As I have already suggested, time at college is precious and scarce. Most of what we learn as Ministers in Training is experienced and

consolidated in the congregation or pioneering setting. And yet our provision of supervision is not routinely assessed and can be very variable in its helpfulness. Mentors provide invaluable sounding boards in the training and newly accredited phases of formation but this rarely takes the form of walking with a minister through a first funeral or wedding. Fear of being on the receiving end of patriarchal and patronising help may result in reluctance to ask for help in the future whereas training ministers to support and pass on knowledge in an empowering way could nurture the kind of professionals who are secure enough to learn from each other: which leads to my last point.

4. Training all ministers to train each other

When passing on knowledge and skills becomes a normal part of who we are, we can abandon the hierarchical pattern of teacher and learner and instead adopt the much more positive professionalism of sharing skills and knowledge. None of us will have the same experiences and all of us will have a different angle or view to helpfully bring to any pastoral situation. Becoming a profession that can share that learning together probably needs to start in the colleges but can be nurtured in ministers' groups and clusters, Newly Accredited Ministers sessions and Continuing Ministerial Development support structures, and dare I say, even in Facebook groups. I am sure that some of this does indeed happen, but I feel we must go much further. Recently retired ministers and ministers with backgrounds in teaching or other professions have a wealth of experience which could be used more widely and which we are not paying enough attention to.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue for a very specific form of professionalism in Baptist ministry. My own Regional Minister, Geoff Colmer, has a phrase that I have always found challenging and inspiring. He talks about the minister always being the non-anxious presence in the room.[32] This is not easy and yet I think we can all aspire to that calm presence that is able to be competent and trustworthy while still being wholly attentive to the situation and what God is saying in it. It is this professional holy space that I would like us

[32] See Geoff Colmer, 'Regional Minister Fridge Magnets', *Ministry Today* 58 (August, 2013): 17-23.

to aim for. A space gained through the hard work of training, the rigours of formation and the openness to the Spirit that these two disciplines can release. It is in this holy space that I believe we can find a new confidence and secure identity. How many of us have sat in ecumenical meetings and found ourselves the poor relation because our state church colleagues seem to hold a more professionally secure space? In these days of mistrust in institutions and government, perhaps it is the nonconformist's moment? Perhaps this is our time to step into a secure public identity and use those professional skills that we can offer people at the key moments of their lives; birth, marriage, death and loss? Even in a post-churched society, people still reach out for professional assistance at these crucial moments and a good encounter with an approachable and yet professionally competent and reassuring presence can be transformative for the people we encounter. Indeed these moments may well become the only times when most of society reaches out to us in the church and we need to make sure that we make the most of each opportunity.

But I also think that we can be aiming towards something much kinder and supportive than we have perhaps offered each other before. The various Facebook groups for ministers give us a glimpse of both the best and worst of what a professional nurturing community can offer. It should not be a place where we all moan about our lot, and yet it can be a place where we can be vulnerable enough to own our particular knowledge and experience deficits and learn from each other for the benefit of our congregations and those who have yet to join them. This kind of community learning and support only thrives when the participants are professionally secure enough to be vulnerable and honest about our own experiences or lack of them. It is a place of pastoral integrity that acknowledges that we all need to be lifelong learners and take responsibility for the next generation of ministers to come.

The word 'professional' has so many difficulties for Baptist ministers, but that elusive state of confidence with humility and vulnerability is something I believe is worth striving for. It is, I believe, the way for us to offer a much needed voice in the public sphere, through private pastoral encounters, and as we speak to the collective experience of grief and loss that the pandemic has placed us all in. It is also a way for us, as Baptists, to feel more comfortable in our own skins and hold our

own in the ecumenical conversation. And as Baptist colleges increasingly have to fight for their own existence in the complex world of further education, a professional and supportive community in our churches and among our qualified ministers is the only way that future Ministers in Training will receive the kind of training we would expect of any other professional person.

Notes on Author

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Cover Image

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.