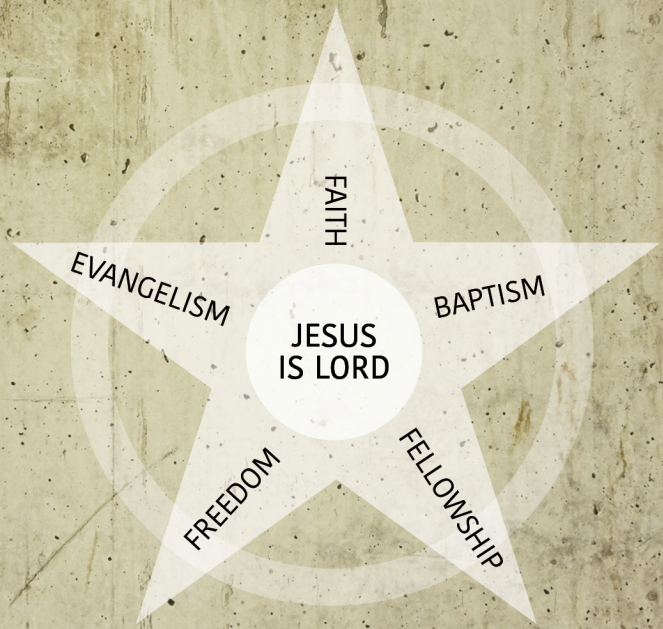


Journal of Baptist Theology
in context



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Editorial

Sally Nelson

Welcome to this third issue of *JBTC*, which seems to me to incarnate much of that for which we first hoped when the journal was conceived. Here we have a celebration of British Baptist scholarship and reflection: a place for us to read and discuss substantial matters vital to our life together.

Steve Holmes' exploration of Baptist identity is surely a gift to us as our Union, Associations and churches attempt to navigate the complexities of twenty-first century Christian discipleship. 'Why am I a Baptist? I know, but I can't tell you!' is often our experience when pressed on the point. Steve brings a panoramic vision to this question and helpfully explores – and explodes – some of the safe platitudes to which we often resort, seeking instead some helpful 'relatively stable principles' that can be applied to the wide variety of expressions of Baptist life. He travels through various 'single-' and 'multi-' point definitions of being Baptist, in particular our approach to reading Scripture, which he terms as 'differently biblical', meaning we read congregationally, and with a view not to generating doctrinal propositions but rather to praxis and mimesis. Being Baptist, he concludes, is living under the Lordship of Christ – as, indeed, all Declarations of Principle assert. I shall definitely use this essay with students exploring their identity as Baptists.

Next we turn to Simon Harry's study of intergenerational church in British Baptist life. Simon asks whether Baptist ecclesiology impairs the ability of the church to be inclusive of and responsive to children and young people, and how this practice impoverishes the church since part of the body of Christ is effectively silenced. He offers some positive examples of intergenerational experience and explores the viability of intergenerationality within some key metaphors of church used by Baptists: the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God, and church as family. By drawing on research by Fiddes, Martin, Goodliff and others, he concludes that any rigid boundary around who is 'in' or 'out' of church effectively excludes the unbaptized in credobaptist

communities. If the lordship of Christ is discerned at church meeting, then how do we hear those absent voices of faith? Simon concludes by encouraging us to think of the positive two-way dialogue of learning between the generations and a hopeful note about models such as Messy Church increasingly being adopted by Baptists.

Finally, we are invited into a conversation around the content of Andy Goodliff's recent book, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*. Paul Fiddes, Lina Toth and Tony Peck are the dialogue partners, reviewing Andy's study of the tumultuous decade of the 1990s in British Baptist life, during which the denomination was reviewed and changed both structurally and – some would argue – ecclesologically. Indeed, the extent to which Baptists do things because of expediency (rather than from theological justification) forms a plank of the discussion reported here in *JBTC*. Is this the characteristic Baptist inability to decide between theology and pragmatism to which Steve Holmes has also referred in his article on Baptist identity? Are we suspicious of theology in our very DNA? And are we still stuck in the middle of that discussion as we try to find a way to sustain Baptist witness, with its increasingly challenging emphasis on every-member commitment, in a postmodern culture? Andy's three protagonists each engage helpfully with the question of our covenanting together and they are united in affirming the vitality of this book for ongoing studies of Baptist life in the UK.

Our hope for *JBTC* is that it will remind us that theology is important, fascinating, and spiritually fruitful for Baptists as we plot our course into the future. The treasure discovered here in Issue 3 can only encourage us.

Baptist Identity, Once More

Stephen R. Holmes, St. Andrews, Scotland

Abstract: *This article addresses the perennial question of Baptist identity, critiquing the oft-adopted adage that Baptists are essentially congregationalists who adopt believers' baptism. It explores critically some multi-point and single-point understandings of 'Baptist' and alights on a 'biblically different' hermeneutical understanding that bridges the divide between pragmatism and theology, construing our baptistic identity as dynamically 'under the Lordship of Christ'.*

Key Words: *Baptist identity, associationalism, lordship of Christ, mimesis, differently biblical*

I have written several pieces on Baptist identity over the past few years, and published more than one of them.¹ This essay does not, I think, contradict anything I have said before, but rather gathers various strands up and proposes a more stable theological foundation for it all. It is written from a self-consciously British perspective, although regularly discussing international writers whose ideas have been influential in these islands. By 'Baptist identity' I mean an account of what it is to be a specifically Baptist Christian or church.²

The Purpose and Mood of Proposals about Baptist Identity

Why debate Baptist identity? Most of the proposals discussed below seem to own one of four major purposes. Some were essentially utilitarian: a Baptist denomination needs some account of its own identity so that, for example, it may judge whether a church applying for membership should be accepted or not. This is important, but not very interesting theologically, and probably involves a combination of

¹ Stephen R. Holmes, 'Baptists and the Bible' *BQ* 43 (2010), pp. 410-427; *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); 'Beyond a Bath and a Book: Baptist Theological Commitments' *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 9 (2014), pp. 11-24.

² This essay grew out of some comments I prepared for a (Zoom) meeting of the Fellowship of Baptists in Britain and Ireland, which in turn grew out of a sermon I was invited to preach for the church anniversary at Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend-on-Sea. I am very grateful for both invitations, and for the discussion at the FBBI. It feels appropriately Baptist that the core argument of this paper was first developed during sermon preparation.

intrinsic and occasional features (Baptist denominations are often defined geographically, for example, and so a congregation might be impeccably Baptist but refused membership of a denomination on grounds of geography.)

Second, accounts of Baptist identity can arise from formal ecumenical engagement: in bilateral dialogue, papers are written to explain traditions to each other.³ Any of us who have engaged in ecumenical dialogue know that one of the gifts of the process is a greater understanding of your own tradition as you are enabled in part to see yourself through the eyes of another, and so useful advances in our accounts of Baptist identity might be made in such contexts. The formal aim of all ecumenical work is mission, and so these accounts of Baptist identity might be said to have mission as their final goal; the proximate purpose, however, is being understood by another tradition.

Third, many accounts of Baptist identity arise out of a conviction that there is something of worth in the tradition that should not be lost, and so an attempt is made to identify that and to disseminate it. If a church were to lose its Baptist identity, and drift into a non-denominational evangelicalism, what (if anything) would be lost that is of genuine value? Narrating this, whether as a celebration of what we hold, or as a warning to churches that are perceived to be in danger of drifting, is another reason to give an account of Baptist identity.

Fourth, a significant number of recent accounts of Baptist identity are agonistic. The writer finds being Baptist as painful as it is inescapable, and writes to explore this difficult juxtaposition. As a dominant theme, this seems particularly common in recent US accounts, generally penned by those on the losing side of the recent troubles of the SBC;⁴ it is hard to imagine a responsible account of Baptist identity that does not have threads like this running through it, however. To take just one example, if we represent our commitment to world mission as one of the glories of our tradition, we cannot but reflect seriously on postcolonial critiques of the practice of mission, and acknowledge that

³ My own 'Beyond a Bath and a Book' started life as a paper written for the BWA-World Methodist Council dialogue.

⁴ See, for representative example, Bill J. Leonard, *The Challenge of Being Baptist: Owning a Scandalous Past and an Uncertain Future* (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2010).

that ‘glory’ has not been unmixed with racism and colonial exploitation.

Such agonistic accounts always (in my present experience) turn to (the possibility of) redemption: although the lived practice of Baptist life in this or that particular, or in a given location, has been damaging, oppressive, or simply evil, the Baptist tradition contains the necessary ideas and practices to critique the failures and build something better—less evil; more faithfully Baptist. World mission is a noble ideal, we might continue to insist, but we must learn to engage in world mission in an anti-racist way.

The third and fourth categories above raise the issue of what I am calling the ‘mood’ of an account of Baptist identity: is it fundamentally celebratory, somewhat chastened, or positively agonized? In calling myself ‘Baptist’, am I proudly claiming a fundamental success, humbly owning my part in a significant story of failure, or something more complex and nuanced in between? This question of mood seems a significant, but hitherto unexplored, one in recent accounts of Baptist identity; I will return to it at the end of this essay.

Non-Theological Definitions of Baptist Identity

We might think that the simplest definition of Baptist identity is organizational. We could try such formulations as ‘a Baptist is someone who is a member of a church that is a member of a denomination that is a member of the Baptist World Alliance,’ or ‘a Baptist is someone who is a member of a church that calls itself “Baptist”’. Both these definitions in fact have significant problems—there are several Baptist denominations that are not presently in membership of the BWA, including the Southern Baptist Convention; and many Baptist churches do not in fact have the word ‘Baptist’ in their title—but we could look for an account with fewer weaknesses. That said, the limitations already referenced will demonstrate the happenstance nature of any such definition: identification based on organizational affiliation or mere nomenclature is never going to capture the deep identity of a movement.

A more academic version of such an argument might look to Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential account of the nature of traditions. A

‘tradition,’ MacIntyre famously asserts, is ‘an argument extended through time’.⁵ The continuity of a tradition, that is, is a continuity of engagement: I engage with people who engaged with people who engaged with people who, after several dozen iterations, engaged with John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, and so I am a Baptist. The key point here is that, on MacIntyre’s telling, I do not need to agree with Smyth and Helwys about anything; the tradition can morph into something totally unrecognizable but still be the same tradition because there has been a continuity of engagement.⁶

There is significant utility in such an account: there is much in the life of my local Baptist church that Smyth and Helwys, or indeed Sam Sharpe, C.H. Spurgeon, Anne Steele, or J.H. Shakespeare, would find very puzzling. The appeal of the concept of ‘Baptist identity,’ however, would seem to be the hope that there is some deep continuity in the changed practices. If we live differently, it is because we are developing an authentic expression of the same core instincts in a different cultural context. When he was Principal of Spurgeon’s College, I recall Nigel Wright saying fairly regularly that the college should not do what Spurgeon did, but rather what Spurgeon would be doing were he ministering in London around the turn of the twenty-first century—different practices that express the same deep convictions or instincts. MacIntyre is right to suggest that if the tradition has morphed into something unrecognizable, then it has failed.⁷

The search for Baptist identity, then, is the search for the relatively stable principles that underlie the endlessly varying Baptist cultural expressions of church. It seems likely that such principles will be theological: they will be about God, or about other things (human beings, the church, the state...) as they relate to God. So any successful organizational or historical account of Baptist identity is likely to depend on theological themes. I turn, then, to accounts of Baptist identity that list theological distinctives.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), p. 12.

⁶ MacIntyre in fact thinks that a tradition that changes radically has failed in significant ways, but he does insist on the continuing identity of the tradition.

⁷ This is a similar argument to the one made in Kimlyn J. Bender, ‘Karl Barth, Confessionalism, and the Question of Baptist Identity’ *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45 (2018) pp. 49-67, although developed in dialogue with MacIntyre, rather than Barth.

Multi-Point Definitions of Baptist Identity

Clearly, the practice of believers' baptism (or rather, the refusal of the practice of infant baptism—all sacramental Christian traditions will baptize adult converts) is intrinsic to Baptist identity, but equally clearly, it is not sufficient as a definition: there are many Protestant groups that only baptize believers, including, for example, several Wesleyan holiness traditions, and many, probably most, Pentecostal traditions, as well as almost all of the new charismatic church streams. On this basis, it has become fairly common to offer 'multi-point' definitions of Baptist identity, the most common in the UK probably being that Baptists are distinctive in holding to both the practice of believers' baptism, and congregational church government. To give only one example, H. Wheeler Robinson's *Baptist Principles*, which was originally published in 1925, had its fourth edition in 1960, and so enjoyed long use among British Baptists, identifies Baptists simply as congregationalists who insist on believers' baptism.⁸ This appears to work quite well: it includes most of the people who would claim to be a part of the Baptist movement, and excludes most who would be unhappy at being classed as such. If it fails, it is in being a little too capacious; in particular it includes Mennonites and other anabaptist traditions who would not want to be identified as Baptists.

This twin test appears to be the right one to apply to evaluate a proposed definition, and it is striking how badly some suggestions fail it. In the Foreword to (one of several American books entitled) *Why I am a Baptist*, Morris H. Chapman suggests three 'irreducible minimums for defining Baptists': '[d]evotion to Jesus'; 'Biblical fidelity'; and '[m]issionary fervour'.⁹ I trust that this particular net would catch far more than just the Baptists!¹⁰ I will reflect a little more at the end of this essay on the extent to which our accounts of Baptist identity must

⁸ H. Wheeler Robinson *Baptist Principles* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1960⁴).

⁹ Morris H. Chapman, 'Foreword' in Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore (eds) *Why I am a Baptist* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2001), pp. xi-xiii, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁰ The various essays in the book are better, but it did not attract very much attention in the UK, being explicitly written into the internal SBC debates of the period, and the various writers all offer (various combinations of) themes that are raised anyway by the documents I am treating here, so I will not give them extensive treatment below. Unsurprisingly, given the context of the book, some sort of Scripture principle, often explicitly inerrancy, is rather to the fore.

conform to the two canons of including all those who claim the denomination, and excluding all who refuse it, but the fundamental utility is, I trust, clear.

The year that Robinson's book had its fourth edition fell in the middle of a four-year 'ter-jubilee' (i.e. 150th anniversary) celebration of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, for which Morris West was commissioned to write a short guide to Baptist principles. He selected four: biblical authority; the church as a company of believers gathered out of the world; believers' baptism; and freedom of conscience.¹¹ West's booklet outlasted the celebration for which it was written, and went through several printings to at least 1975, and so again must be taken with some seriousness. The authority of the Bible and freedom of conscience are certainly things Baptists have been committed to historically, and so are appropriate additions; they do not serve to exclude those groups improperly included by my first definition, however.

Given that he was writing specifically for a BUGBI celebration, it is perhaps surprising that West did not turn to the Declaration of Principle as his guide (although he does cite it once, on p.13). The three clauses of the Declaration of Principle suggest four points of identity: the authority of Christ, the liberty of each church, believers' baptism, and every-member mission. The last point is reminiscent of Oncken's famous slogan, '*Jeder Baptist ein Missionar*' ('every Baptist is a missionary'), and some focus on mission does seem, merely historically, a good candidate for being a part of a narration of Baptist identity.

Stanley Grenz's popular acronym is perhaps more clever than helpful: Believers' baptism, Autonomy of the local church, Primacy of Scripture, True believers in the church, Individual competency and believer priesthood, Separation of church and state, Two ordinances.¹² 'Separation of church and state' is certainly an important aspect of Baptist identity; 'individual competency' recalls E. Y. Mullins' language of 'soul competency,' which I shall consider in some depth below. The

¹¹ W.M.S. West, *Baptist Principles* (London: BUGBI, 1960), 6.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 82.

paired term ‘believer priesthood’ captures something important about Baptist identity, not mentioned by other authors here. The best that can be said of ‘two ordinances’ is that it makes the acronym work; it is hardly a Baptist distinctive, and indeed might exclude historically significant strands of the Baptist tradition (e.g. the General Association of General Baptists through the second half of the seventeenth century) who have regarded the laying on of hands as significant enough to break fellowship over.¹³ Finally, I confess an allergy to the language of ‘autonomy’, whilst recognizing what it is trying to capture. Yes, the local church is not under any other human rule—but the local church is not *auto-nomos*; it does not rule itself; rather, it is under the authority of Christ, and has as its law, its *nomos*, the Scriptures.

Another long list was written for Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church by Faith Bowers, but has been taken up internationally, and published. Bowers includes all the points mentioned by West, and adds: a missionary focus; evangelicalism; ‘fellowship giving’ as the ‘chief means of financing church work’; interdependence and associationalism; and godly living.¹⁴ Given that the Baptist movement predates the evangelical revival, I am not sure about including evangelicalism as a Baptist distinctive—it would seem to disenfranchise Smyth and Helwys, among others. Associationalism does seem to me a strong candidate; as I have argued elsewhere, the instinct for churches to associate runs very deep in our history.¹⁵ ‘Fellowship giving’ is interesting: it is a reality, and probably does contribute to a lived sense of Baptist identity, but I am not sure I would elevate it to a principle—were one of our churches to receive a sufficiently large bequest that it could be put in trust to pay the minister’s stipend in perpetuity, that would not make them unBaptist. Godly living, again, is certainly something we have insisted on as a people.

¹³ This decision was taken because the practice is listed as one of the fundamentals of the faith in Heb. 6:1-2. A resolution at the 1656 General Assembly declared that ‘breaking of bread wth psns [with people] denying laying on of hands is not Lawful.’ W.T. Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1909) (2 vols), vol. I, 6.

¹⁴ Faith Bowers, ‘Prophets and Pietists: Differing Faces of Baptist Identity’ in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haynes* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2011), 190.

¹⁵ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 104-7.

The extent to which the various proposals on these lists tend to praxis, to things we do, rather than doctrine, things we believe, is striking, and I will have more to say about this below. There are also different ways of expressing similar points in different lists, which invite some reflection: do we speak of the particular Baptist doctrine of the church as ‘congregationalism’, the ‘liberty’ or ‘autonomy’ of the local church, the ‘gathered church’, or what? And how much does that matter? In part, the difference of expression can be seen to be a first degree of abstraction away from praxis to the doctrine a particular practice embodies. One of my own earlier attempts to narrate Baptist identity centred on the suggestion that it revolves around two foci, the individual believer, and the local church.¹⁶ This was, consciously, an attempt to begin to perform this work of abstraction on the two elements of the simplest account of Baptist identity, believers’ baptism and congregational church government.

We may also ask about the inter-relatedness of these various listed Baptist distinctives. It would be relatively easy to argue, for example, that believers’ baptism is an inevitable result of a commitment to freedom of conscience (it is harder, but possible, to argue that they are mutually entailed). Similarly, belief in a gathered believers’ church probably does entail the separation of church and state. In my book, already referenced, I argued that all Baptist distinctives can be traced back to either a conviction about the dignity of the individual believer, or a conviction about the primacy of the local church. It is at least tempting to ask if we can go one better, and reduce the heart of the Baptist vision to a single commitment. There are certainly proposals that seek to do this.

Single-Point Definitions of Baptist Identity

There are two suggestions of a single commitment that can define Baptist identity that have attracted wide notice and support. The first is the suggestion that Baptists are uniquely committed to biblical authority. I have introduced this theme before with a lengthy quotation from James Bruton Gambrell (1841-1921), sometime president both of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and of

¹⁶ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 6-7.

the Southern Baptist Convention; his construction is sufficiently stirring that I will use it again:

God's Word is plain. A Baptist has only to read and obey. He need not be a scholar, or a philosopher, though he may be both. He has no trouble to explain away what is written. He can read it and go by it without embarrassment. He can afford to be plain, simple, straightforward, and obedient...I am a Baptist because John was, Jesus was, the apostles were, the first churches were, and all the world ought to be.¹⁷

On this account, being Baptist is being uniquely faithful to the Scriptures. Others equivocate and evade; we simply obey. This is perhaps the high-water mark of accounts of Baptist identity in a celebratory mood, but it is not very hard to find more recent examples of the same theme. To offer only one example, a 1999 volume expressed the 'wish that all evangelical Christians would search the Scriptures and thus prove what is true faith and practice'.¹⁸ Measured against my two-fold test above the claim that to be Baptist is to be obedient to the authority of Scripture fails badly as an account of Baptist identity in both directions: there are many committed to the authority of Scripture in other traditions,¹⁹ and there are many Baptists who are open enough about the fact that they are not.

¹⁷ Cited from <https://swbts.edu/news/swbts-legacy-j-b-gambrell/> (last accessed 10/12/2020).

¹⁸ L. Russ Bush & Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), xvii.

¹⁹ To address directly the central point: I cannot find a firm denial of infant baptism in the New Testament, and I can appreciate why the claim that a typological reading of circumcision mandates the baptism of infants born into the church covenant is found convincing by some. (Indiscriminate infant baptism seems impossible to square with Scripture to me.) Obviously I think that I am right on this issue, but I do not think that those who differ are denying straightforward biblical truths. Rather, we differ over accounts of the relationship of the two Testaments, the nature of typology and fulfilment, and the strength of certain inferences (made from the necessity of repentance before baptism, for example). From their perspective, my refusal to accept their exegetical argument concerning circumcision is no less an unwillingness to listen to Scripture than I would charge them with over NT teaching about repentance. We both take our stand firmly on Scripture, but coordinate its various claims in different ways. We are, to use language that I am about to invoke in this essay, 'differently biblical'.

I have argued before that Baptists are ‘differently biblical’ from other traditions,²⁰ which may be a way of retaining a Scripture principle as the single defining point of Baptist identity. My earlier argument had to do with how we hear Scripture—fundamentally, in church meeting—but also in what we understand Scripture to be—fundamentally as law, a call to praxis, rather than doctrine, a call to belief. Believers’ baptism is a helpful example here: one can read thousands of pages of Baptist polemic on baptism, from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, and discover nothing about what baptism is or does. Instead, the endlessly repeated message will be: the apostolic church baptized only believers; therefore we should baptize only believers. On baptism, Baptists have argued, the Scriptures teach a practice, not an account of what that practice means. I have regularly (although not in print before now, I think) termed the Baptist approach to the New Testament in particular as ‘mimetic’: we seek to do what the apostles did, often without any reflection on the theological constructions behind the practice.²¹

This mimetic approach is visible in our informal liturgies. In many UK Baptist churches, at least, the celebration of the Eucharist will involve the reading of the words of institution from 1 Cor. 11, and then a phrase like ‘as Jesus gave thanks before he broke the bread, so shall we’. This is mimesis in liturgy: we examine the Scriptures to determine what was done then, and do the same now. When we felt the need for a public ritual welcoming a new baby into the life of the church fellowship, we read a passage in Mark that described Jesus taking little children into his arms, laying hands on them, and blessing them, and

²⁰ Holmes, ‘Baptists and the Bible’ *passim*.

²¹ If I am right in suggesting that others do not share this mimetic approach to Bible reading, it helpfully explains differences over baptism. It is not hard to find discussions of baptism from paedobaptist writers who are committed to the authority of Scripture, and who accept completely the claim that baptism of believers by immersion was the apostolic practice. They, however, are prepared then to argue for an extension or development of practice based on a theological understanding of what this apostolic practice means. (See, for example, David F. Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005)). In the long history of Baptist polemics on the issue, we have generally greeted such suggestions with incomprehension: it is not so much that we thought the arguments failed, as that we failed to understand that an argument like this could even be attempted. This is the mimetic aspect of our identity.

we imitated his actions.²² Our rite of infant presentations is mimetic—and also untheologized;²³ we have a pattern of action designed to imitate a NT narrative, with no shared agreement about how to understand it. Of course, our mimesis is partial: in the Eucharist we do not have a single cup, nor do we fill it with wine. Wherever we are mimetic, however, we draw attention to the fact, suggesting that this is how we want to be perceived as relating to Scripture.

James McClendon's famous account of the 'baptist vision', often summed up in the phrase 'this is that; then is now,' could be read as mimesis as I am describing it here.²⁴ McClendon offered a well-theorized defence, of course, arguing that the typological shape of Scripture authorized a particular sort of typological hermeneutic. In his coinage 'small-b baptist' McClendon essentially surrendered the quest for a specifically Baptist identity—we are not distinct in any interesting way from anabaptist traditions on his account. The proposal I will develop below does not deny that we share a heritage with other baptists (in McClendon's terms), but it does propose a way of specifying a distinctive identity within that shared heritage.²⁵

²² *Patterns and Prayers* makes this remarkably clear: after the promises, the rubric reads 'Taking the child from the mother ... the leader ...' and then, before pronouncing the Aaronic blessing, 'Placing his or her hand on the child's head, the leader ...' The alternative pattern is even more direct: 'The mother gives the child to the minister who, placing his or her hand on the child's head [pronounces the blessing].' Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship: A Guidebook for Worship Leaders* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 113 & 116.

²³ As with other mimetic practices, there have been attempts to theologize infant presentation retrospectively—see for example Andrew J. Goodliff, *To Such as These: The Child in Baptist Thought* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2012). My point here is that we did not feel any pressure to give a theological account of what we were doing before doing it, and commending the doing of it by inclusion in our ministers' manuals; the defence of the introduction of the practice was merely mimetic.

²⁴ 'So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical principle: shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive Christian and the eschatological community. In a motto, the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is our liberty, our obedience, till time's end.' James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 30. The best interpretation of this theme in McClendon that I have read is Spencer M. Boersma, *The baptist Vision: Narrative Theology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.* (PhD thesis, Wycliffe College/University of Toronto, 2017), 50-79.

²⁵ We might consider how McClendon's proposal relates to T.L. Underwood's fine account of Baptist and Quaker origins, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and The Lamb's War: The*

I am therefore not wholly dismissive of the claim that submission to biblical authority is the single decisive point of Baptist identity. It is possible to argue that we do engage with the Bible in a somewhat different way to other Christians, and so, *pace* Bush & Nettles, we do not need to claim that other evangelicals/Christians are not as committed to following the Bible as we are to establish our particular identity. Rather, our identity might consist in being as committed to Scripture, but also in hearing its summons in a somewhat different way than others.

Although it is not narrated, it is not hard to find this mimetic vision in the multi-point proposals I outlined above. West, for example, offers briefly two ways of engaging with the Bible. The first is locating the Christian community in the already-but-not-yet tension of the coming Kingdom; the second is locating the individual Christian in the biblical narrative: 'the Fall is my fall ... [t]he call to the disciples is the call to me ...'²⁶ This story is my story, and so I am called to act the way that Jesus and the apostles acted—this is mimesis. Again, the fact that so many of the proposed distinctives were practices might be seen to relate to this mimetic approach to Scripture: if we are fundamentally concerned to do what the apostles did, then our distinctives will be in our praxis. Mimesis, then, is a significant part of Baptist identity, but it is not a sufficient single identification. It narrates believers' baptism well, but it cannot, as far as I can see, narrate church meeting.²⁷

Baptist-Quaker Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England (Oxford: OUP, 2001), which argues that the distinction between Baptists and Quakers was between what I have termed mimesis, copying apostolic practice, and Quaker attempts to actually become the New Testament church (see p. 4 for a clear introductory statement of this theme). In these terms, 'then is now' (and the longer quotation in n. 23 above) sounds like it is on the Quaker side, not the Baptist side. McClendon could no doubt simply claim that both Baptists and Quakers share his baptist vision, but a consideration of Underwood's historical work makes the point that there are distinctions to be made still within that shared vision.

²⁶ West, *Baptist Principles*, 11-12; this sounds very like (an anticipation of) McClendon.

²⁷ This perhaps requires a little defence: I am not claiming that church meeting is an unbiblical practice—I am committed to the view that if we hold a biblical view of human capacity, of the work of the Spirit, of the nature of the church, and so on, then we will conclude that congregationalism is a proper way of governing the church. But this is not something we can establish mimetically: there is no example of church meeting in the New Testament. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 was explicitly a meeting of 'apostles and elders' (v. 6), and so cannot be used as an example; Acts 13:1-2 at least implies that those who were worshipping and fasting (v.2) were the 'prophets

Arguably the most successful narration of Baptist Identity in history is that of E. Y. Mullins in *The Axioms of Religion*.²⁸ Mullins gives a six-point statement of Baptist identity, in the following axioms:

1. The theological axiom: the holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign.
2. The religious axiom: all souls have an equal right to direct access to God
3. The ecclesiastical axiom: all believers have a right to equal privileges in the church
4. The moral axiom: to be responsible, man [*sic*] must be free
5. The religio-civic axiom: a free church in a free state.
6. The social axiom: love your neighbour as yourself (pp73-4)

Mullins asserts, however, that the single confession of ‘the competency of the soul in religion under God’ (p73) is the core Baptist distinctive, which the previous six will immediately be seen to arise from. (This last claim is fortunate if true, as he does not pause to make the demonstrations.²⁹) He argues that this doctrine of ‘soul competency’ is the unique contribution of Baptists to history (pp59-69). What does soul competency mean? Mullins is emphatic that it is not an assertion of human autonomy—it is a ‘competency under God’ (p53). The competent soul has no need for any mediation in religious matters, but can approach God directly, so this principle excludes ‘episcopacy and infant baptism, and every form of religion by proxy’ (p54).

The success of Mullins’ account can be indicated by quoting the opening words of a 1939 BWA declaration: ‘[w]orthy religion rests on the conviction that the individual soul is competent to deal directly with God, and has the right and the need of this direct dealing’.³⁰

and teachers’ (v.1). Mt. 18:15-20 gives a clear procedure for dealing with reports of sin, but no general guidance on the ordering of the church.

²⁸ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908). I wrote about Mullins in *Baptist Theology*, 132-36; I am basically summarizing that discussion and critique here, although I am now rather more appreciative of the strength of his proposal, if just as critical of its distorting effect.

²⁹ I cannot see how Mullins’ theological axiom can be argued from soul competency at all; I will discuss some of the others below.

³⁰ ‘Text of the Declaration of Religious Liberty adopted...’ in Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1964), 248-9.

Thirty years after he published, the world body found his language natural to use. Nor is this success surprising: Mullins' one idea does indeed lead directly to many of the Baptist distinctives I have been discussing in this essay. Believers' baptism, the priesthood of all believers, and freedom of religion/conscience follow directly, as does the missionary imperative if we also confess human sinfulness. If all members of a church are equally competent in religion, then congregationalism becomes the natural form of church government.

The separation of church and state is more interesting. Mullins argues that a state church arises from a belief that human beings need 'civil government' to fulfil their 'religious destiny' (p54), and so is excluded by soul competency. This seems to me wrong. That said, the affirmation of soul competency does seem to remove any justification for coercion in matters of religion, which in turn rules out any imposition of a state church, at least. It is hard to see how any sort of commitment to biblical authority flows from an affirmation of soul competency. Nonetheless, this single principle is remarkably generative for Baptist identity.

That said, there are four problems that I see with Mullins' proposal. The first is that, on Mullins' telling, soul competency is also the core idea of American democracy, and so there is a worrying—and to my mind profoundly unBaptist—conflation of a core theological commitment and a particular political system. This is at its most egregious when Mullins offers a quite astonishing typological reading of the American flag ('...and the cluster of stars in the flag, each star separate from the other stars, tells of the principles of autonomy and individualism which underlie our whole system; and they are stars to show that those principles of freedom were born in heaven...') and immediately goes on to assert '[w]e are approaching the Baptist age of the world, because we are approaching the triumph of democracy' (p275). The Baptist witness I have received simply and steadfastly refuses to identify any human political system with the Kingdom of God, and I will stand by that as a Baptist principle alongside the others named above.³¹

³¹ To put it in terms that have unfortunately become familiar very recently, an authentic Baptist vision must declare 'Christian nationalism' to be a grave error.

That said, if Mullins is wrong in seeing something particularly Baptist in his nation's political system, this does not affect his fundamental proposal. This linkage with American democracy, that is, is not entailed by anything in the theological claims he makes—his error is to associate a political system with those theological claims. So the charitable reader might discount these political claims, and yet still follow his account of Baptist identity.

The second problem I see is in the inevitable implications of his chosen terminology. There is a basically optimistic register to all Mullins has to say about the spiritual status of each human person. We are each competent in religious matters, able to approach God without any need for mediation. This seems to me to be the wrong levelling, even though I agree with Mullins that levelling is necessary. If we are to be responsible to the gospel, we have to insist, rather, that all human beings are, without the gracious and miraculous intervention of God, utterly incompetent in spiritual matters. The sacerdotal error is not to suggest that lay people cannot approach God without priests, but rather to suggest that priests can somehow enable other people to approach God. East of Eden, my soul has no religious competency—and nor does the soul of the Pope. We are equally and utterly reliant on divine grace. This seems to me to be fatal to Mullins' chosen language; the extent to which it is fatal to his proposal is less clear.

My third problem is that Mullins' proposal is essentially untheological: he grounds Baptist identity in a claim about human capacity, not in a claim about the work of the triune God. I indicated above that claims about Baptist identity should be theological: about God, or about other things in relation to God. Mullins' proposal might be retrievable in the face of this criticism: soul competency for him is only 'under God' as we have seen, and it may be that the idea could be developed in a more thoroughly theological key. That said, this lack of any basic theological register is why Mullins' account cannot locate a Scripture-principle as a Baptist distinctive, and so this does seem a significant weakness.

My fourth problem is that, theologically considered, I think Mullins' account of 'soul competency' contradicts fundamental Christian doctrine in at least two areas: creation, and soteriology. To take the latter first, it seems fairly foundational biblically that we sinful human

beings do require mediation to approach God, but that God supplies the necessary mediation in the incarnation. Hebrews in particular tells us not that we need no priest, but that Jesus our great high priest surpasses and supplants every human priest.³² On creation, I lean on my *doktorvater* Colin Gunton's claim, which he attributed to Irenaeus, that creation must be mediated to have its own adequate reality, but that God again supplies the necessary mediation through God's 'two hands', the Son and the Spirit.³³

This might sound rather damning of Mullins, but I do not think it is: I suppose that, presented with these points, he would have acceded to both, protesting that by 'no mediator' he meant 'no mediator other than Jesus and the Spirit'. The distinction feels too important to be elided or assumed, however, and I wonder how different his account would have been in the three areas of criticism above had he made it, and written the relevant sections while consciously aware of it.

I am not simply dismissive of Mullins' proposal: it clearly found a ready audience in international Baptist life in the decades after it was published,³⁴ and that is a testimony to its seriousness; it does, as I have acknowledged, successfully ground almost all Baptist distinctives; its weaknesses can easily be but down to Mullins' particular presentation of it, and so relativized. It, to my mind, has to remain a serious candidate for a single-point definition of Baptist identity, for an account of what it is to be Baptist reduced to a single theme.

An Alternative Proposal: The Active, Direct, Lordship of Jesus

That said, the criticisms, particularly the latter two theological criticisms, of Mullins' proposal are enough to give me pause, and I have an alternative to offer: to be Baptist is to believe in the active, direct, Lordship of Jesus over every person and over every local

³² David Moffitt, both my academic colleague, and a fellow-elder of St Andrews Baptist Church, has argued this, simply convincingly in my view. David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011); see also *idem*, 'Jesus' Heavenly Sacrifice in Early Christian Reception of Hebrews: A Survey', *JTS* ns 68 (2017), 46-71.

³³ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998).

³⁴ Although not, as far as I can see, particularly in UK Baptist self-reflection.

congregation. I will (a) explain what I mean by this; (b) show how it grounds each of the distinctives identified above; (c) compare it to other accounts, particularly to some that sound superficially similar, and also to Mullins' account; and (d) argue that it is deeply-rooted in British Baptist identity, at least.

The key to my proposal is the words 'active,' and 'direct' that specify the nature of the Lordship; clearly the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' is not a Baptist distinctive! By 'direct' I mean that Jesus reigns over each local congregation, and over each human person, directly, without any intermediaries—Jesus is the only mediator between us and the Father. By 'active' I mean that Jesus' reign is dynamic, not static: the call to each individual and church is contextual and changing, not merely a demand to obey the laws of Scripture or similar. In the sermon that I noted was the deep inspiration for this essay, I read Jesus walking among the lampstands and directly addressing the churches in Rev. 1-3 in these terms. On the one hand, Jesus who alone has the right to sit on the throne of heaven is pictured in the first vision of Revelation as eschewing that right, and choosing instead to be close to, present with, his suffering churches; on the other, in the letters to the churches, Jesus speaks directly to each particular congregation about the details of their life at the given moment. Asserting that this is the normal way Jesus exercises his reign over his churches is the heart of what I mean by direct and active Lordship; I claim that Jesus exercises his reign over each human person in the same direct and active way.

Second, I suggest that this direct reign over each human person establishes all the points that Mullins' assertion of soul competency established, but does so with each point transposed into a more theological key. The possibility of, as Mullins had it, 'religion by proxy', is excluded at least as effectively by this account as by soul competency; arguably it is excluded far more effectively as on this account, echoing resonant themes from Thomas Helwys, the one who seeks to set themselves up as a proxy/mediator between God and the human person has no power at all over any human conscience, and is usurping the proper office of the Lord Jesus in seeking to claim such power. I will not follow Helwys in borrowing the biblical language of 'anti-Christ' for anyone who does this, but I will note that his use of it demonstrates how strongly these points are established by my proposal.

The direct reign of the Lord Jesus over every particular congregation also establishes firmly those Baptist distinctives that Mullins perhaps struggled to articulate: the separation of church and state; the gathered nature of the church; the call to communal holiness; and congregational government. On the first, if Jesus reigns directly over the local church, then the state (or any other earthly authority) cannot pretend to be able to govern it. On the second, Jesus calls particular human beings together into the gathered fellowship, and so its identity is established and guaranteed by him. On the third, the call of Jesus to each church is to grow together in holiness. On the last, we need to be clear: the heart of congregationalism is not democracy (here Mullins was surely in error), but the shared duty of gathered believers to discern and obey the particular call of Jesus on that church at that moment in its life. Voting, agendas, and the adoption of Robert's rules of order, are each merely means to accomplish this fundamental end, which could—should—each be set aside tomorrow if they are becoming more important than the end they exist to serve.³⁵

To take the particular point I made against Mullins concerning a Scripture principle, my account fares rather better than his: if Scripture is inspired by the triune God, then the call of Scripture is a major part of—although not all of, as my claim that the Lordship is active must insist—the call of Jesus to each person and each congregation. The Lord who alone claims our allegiance calls us to obey his written laws, as well as his contextual calls.

Third, I note a number of accounts of Baptist identity, some relatively venerable, which sound similar to what I am proposing here; I would very much like to be able to point to a nineteenth-century US account and merely agree: novelty is rarely positive in theology, and I am rather conscious that my arguments are mostly built east of the Atlantic Ocean. That said, I believe that honesty compels me to distinguish my

³⁵ I have written before about how the use of secret ballots was prophetic when it was first proposed in British Baptist life, but has since become, at least, in grave danger of being an impediment to the proper role of the church meeting. Stephen R. Holmes, 'Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting' in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), 172-88. See particularly pp.180-83.

proposal from such similar-sounding predecessors of which I am aware. Consider, for example, Wilkinson's *The Baptist Principle*.³⁶ Wilkinson starts his essay with the affirmation, '[t]he true organising principle of Baptist churches may be stated in three words: it is OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST' (p7; emphasis original). It is clear in the exposition, however, that 'obedience to Christ' for Wilkinson is another way of stating a Scripture-principle: Christ has declared his will in Scripture's commands, and so to obey Christ is to search and follow the Scriptures.

As I hope is already clear, I do not deny this; indeed, I affirm it with passion and conviction; in Rev. 1-3 however I see something more, the direct, contextual command of Jesus to each local church. We might argue exegetically that Jesus's various commands to each church merely re-affirm what is found elsewhere in Scripture, but that is not the point: there is direct, urgent challenge to each church. There is not a command to the church at Pergamum to go and study Num. 22-24 carefully and to reflect on it; rather there is a demand that they repent of the sin of Balaam (Rev. 2:14); similarly; the teaching of the 'Nicolaitans' is condemned (2:15; c.f. 2:6) directly, with no supporting Scriptural reference (leaving us, incidentally, with no real idea of what they taught).

Wilkinson, or someone who took a similar position today, might argue that this is to mistake the unique charisms of apostolic times, necessary because the New Testament had not then been written and collected, for the normal life of the church. My discussion of the particular shape of the Baptist Scripture principle above, however, makes this a very weak argument. Whether we take my mimetic hermeneutic, or McClendon's 'this is that' hermeneutic, it is clear that living out the faith just as the apostles lived it out is central. Drawing artificial distinctions between the apostolic church and the church of every other age is dealing with the Bible in an unBaptist way.³⁷ We cannot insist that we imitate the apostles in the way we baptize and govern

³⁶ William Cleaver Wilkinson, *The Baptist Principle in its Application to Baptist and the Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881).

³⁷ If this were to be read as implying an argument that Baptists should not hold a hard cessationist view on the charismatic gifts, I would not be overly disappointed.

our churches, but then refuse to imitate them in the way we hear the call of our Lord Jesus.

To obey Christ is to search and follow the Scriptures;³⁸ it is also to be attentive to his present word to each particular church. The present word will never be in contradiction to Scripture, and will probably be coordinated to it, but it will be more specific and direct. To offer an example, at a recent church meeting in my own congregation a major and challenging opportunity was shared. There was no Scripture principle that I, or anyone else who spoke in the meeting, could see that mandated the refusal or acceptance of the opportunity. I was asked to pray as the discussion concluded. I referenced the previous Sunday's sermon on Acts 16:6-15, and prayed that the 'Spirit of Jesus' would prevent us from going places we should not go, and would also give us a clear vision of the particular call on our communal life at this moment. I prayed, that is, that we would be helped to hear the present word of Jesus, his direct and immediate contextual calling on our life together. I deliberately and consciously (if extemporaneously) took the teaching of Scripture that we had recently received from our pastor, and applied it in prayer to the questions facing us, to ask for this present word, trusting and praying that Jesus would directly instruct us in the way we should go.

To be clear, I am thus claiming that at every point in the life of a particular congregation where there is a decision that is of consequence, but not clearly mandated by Scripture in either direction, the authentic Baptist position is to believe that we should seek, together, the mind of Christ to determine the correct response. There may be no Biblical warrant for either decision (should our local mission efforts be directed to community X, or community Y? Should we call Revd A or Revd B, each eminently qualified, to be our new pastor? Should we commit time, money, and energy over several years to refurbish our current building, or give the resources elsewhere? ...), but it is the Baptist way to believe that Jesus speaks to our local church about such issues as directly as he once spoke to the church at

³⁸ Searching and following the Scriptures, properly understood, includes serious engagement with tradition. See my arguments about the invocation of tradition in church meeting in Holmes, 'Knowing Together...', 175-6.

Pergamum, and to be concerned to follow his direct and active Lordship in all matters.

Fourth, I want to suggest that this proposal for Baptist identity has deep roots in the British Baptist tradition, at least. The *munus triplex*, the threefold office of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King, was emphasized by Calvin and goes back to St Thomas, but it became an organizing principle for understanding the church among the English Separatists out of whom the Baptists arose.³⁹ The complaint of the Separatists when challenged by others was monotonous: ‘You will have Jesus as your Prophet, and as your Priest, but you will not own Him as your King!’⁴⁰ Separatist congregations—including the Gainsborough-Scrooby church out of which Smyth and Helwys came, and the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey congregation which gave birth to the first Particular Baptists—justified their existence in the face of fierce, sometimes fatal, legal challenge by appealing to the direct Lordship of Christ over their affairs. We Baptists inherited such protests and appeals, and—as I have indicated above—they shape the distinctive appeals to liberty of conscience that Helwys offered at the beginnings of our movement. The identification of the direct and active Lordship of Jesus with the freedom of each human being to choose their own belief, and the conviction that Jesus directly and actively guides each particular congregation, was fundamental to Baptist beginnings in the UK.

Today, British Baptists are mostly organized into various Unions that share a very similar Declaration of Principle. There is a little variation in currently extant versions in the opening Christological descriptors, but every version asserts that ‘Jesus Christ ... is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice...’ The active Lordship of Jesus is today asserted in terms as the beginning of our account of who we are as a people. The account I am giving of our distinctiveness, then, is both embedded in our beginnings, and

³⁹ On this theme see now Ian Birch, *To Follow the Lamb Wheresoever He Goeth: The Ecclesial Polity of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1640-1660* (Monographs in Baptist History 5; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 65-95.

⁴⁰ Birch gives several examples in the chapter referenced above; see also citations in Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616-1649* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), 85-119; and Mark R. Bell, *Apocalypse How? Baptist Movements During the English Revolution* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2000), 55-72.

foundational to our current accounts of our identity. It is neither novel nor partial, but an authentic expression of what it is, and has been, to be Baptist, at least in a British context.

Of course, most British Baptists would not articulate their identity in these terms. As I indicated above, a theological account of identity is an act of abstraction: is there an ideal that might hold together this distinctive set of practices, so that they are not merely haphazard coincidence? The coherence of a set of lived practices, however, is always likely to be tacit: we are inducted into the community by learning the practices, not by being given the theoretical basis which justifies them all. Although I claim that, in our Separatist beginnings, and in the Declarations of Principle today, this theme is explicit, for most Baptists it will be implicit—the organizing centre which makes the several practical distinctives feel like they belong together, even if it is never articulated.

King Jesus reigns. He reigns actively and directly, over every human heart and over every congregation of Christian people. That conviction alone is adequate to explain each one of our Baptist distinctives, and so that one single conviction sums up what it means to be Baptist.

Postscript: On Principles, Portraits, and Procrustes' Bed

There is a danger in writing about communal identity, which I have reflected on already above, that the proposals made become an ideological version of the bed of Procrustes, stretching the community under investigation unnaturally in certain ways, and chopping off other parts, to make the reality fit the theory. Three things should be said about this:

First, we must distinguish between theoretical attempts at definition and reality, which is always messier. As Baptists, we must give priority to reality: our confession of freedom of conscience must imply the right to self-denominate, and so, fundamentally, anyone who claims

the title ‘Baptist’ is one, and anyone who refuses it is not. Our Baptist definitions, at least, cannot function like the bed of myth.⁴¹

Second, however, the work of definition is not thereby rendered irrelevant. A congregation which calls itself ‘Baptist’ after giving up on any practice of baptism⁴² is an anomaly, which should be tolerated (of course), but should not be allowed to obscure the value of definitional work. We will need to debate what can be safely dismissed as an anomaly, and what must be accommodated within our definitions, but the definitional work is still useful.

Third, the point of the definition is to paint a portrait of our communities, in the hope that they will see things about themselves they never had seen before when they look at it. I am no painter, but as a photographer this is a fairly common experience for me. Taking a photo of a scene I know well, or even of a family member, I see something in the image which has always been there, of course, but which I had never noticed consciously before. If the test of an account of Baptist identity is to ask Baptists around the world, ‘does this look like you?’, then the point of such an account is to invite them to see themselves more clearly. Sometimes the recognition will be with a wince—‘ouch! Is that really who we are?’—contributing to what I called above the agonistic mood of Baptist identity; sometimes it might be with a smile—‘yes, I see now something I have always valued, but have never been able to articulate’. Both are important results of this line of research.

Notes on Contributor

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⁴¹ This is not true for other Christian traditions: what it is to be Roman Catholic, for example, is identified clearly in magisterial teaching. Given the shape of Catholic theology, someone who claimed to be Catholic without having been validly baptized (say) would be making a false claim, and should be told so.

⁴² There probably were one or two in the UK as the old General Baptists decayed into unitarianism in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Is British Baptist Ecclesiology a Hindrance to Intergenerational Faith Formation within British Baptist Churches?

Simon Harry

Abstract: *In the past decade intergenerational ministry has for some become increasingly seen as a lost element in church life. This article seeks to assess whether British Baptist ecclesiology is a hindrance to intergenerational ministry within British Baptist churches. By considering particularly the use by Baptist writers of the metaphors of the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God, and family, the article explores the need to consider new ways of viewing children within a Baptist context and the potential benefits of a catechumenate process.*

Key Words: *Baptist, intergenerational, children, catechumenate*

Introduction

What keeps me going are the young, and the very old, the remarkably old. The young are beacons that burn bright with new hope, new energy, with the beauty of fervour, the joy of discovery . . . Just as rejuvenating and energising to me are the examples of those who have lived long, and never aged.⁴³

As the above quote from the seventy-six year old author Michael Morpurgo demonstrates, intergenerational interaction can be highly beneficial. Indeed, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration's inquiry into intergenerational connection, entitled *Healing the Generational Divide*, proposes that 'the benefits of intergenerational projects are personal, societal and economic'.⁴⁴ They noted that 'generational division is damaging for individuals, who may experience higher levels of loneliness, and damaging for the country'.⁴⁵

⁴³ "Michael Morpurgo on keeping right on to the end of the road", BBC News Website accessed on October 7th, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-49936323>.

⁴⁴ United Kingdom, All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration, *Healing the Generational Divide: Interim Report on Intergenerational Connection*, page 9, accessed: June 17, 2019, <https://socialintegrationappg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/Healing-the-Generational-Divide.pdf>.

⁴⁵ United Kingdom, *Healing the Generational Divide*, 9.

Businesses, as well as government, have also noted the benefits of intergenerational interaction. McCarthy and Stone, for example, who develop and manage retirement communities in the UK, encourage intergenerational living for their customers by facilitating visits to local primary schools to help with reading.⁴⁶ Other retirement communities have sought to open intergenerational nurseries for the young and old together, as featured on Channel 4's series 'Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds'.⁴⁷ This has inspired the opening of the first 'intergenerational playgroup' in Oxford.⁴⁸

In a faith context, James White pioneered the concept of beneficial intergenerational interaction in a religious context in his book *Intergenerational Religious Education* in 1988.⁴⁹ Defining intergenerational religious education as 'two or more different age groups of people in a religious community together learning/growing/living in faith through in-common-experiences, parallel-learning, contributive-occasions, and interactive-sharing', White sought to increase meaningful learning between generations by providing opportunities to learn together and share what has been learnt in age-specific groups.⁵⁰ However, it has not been until the past decade that Christian intergenerational initiatives have started to be more common in academic literature and practice.⁵¹

⁴⁶ "The Generation Game: Intergenerational Living", McCarthy & Stone Website, accessed 13th March 2020, <https://www.mccarthyandstone.co.uk/life-and-living/explore/lifestyle/the-generation-game/>

⁴⁷ "Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds", Channel 4 website, accessed on 13th March 2020, <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/old-peoples-home-for-4-year-olds>.

⁴⁸ "New Intergenerational Playgroup looks to join the elderly with the young in Oxford", Oxford Mail website, accessed 13th March 2020, <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/17339167.new-intergenerational-playgroup-looks-join-elderly-young-oxford/>.

⁴⁹ James W. White, *Intergenerational Religious Education*, (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988)

⁵⁰ White, *Intergenerational*, 18.

⁵¹ Mariette Martineau, Joan Weber & Leif Kehrwald, *Intergenerational Faith Formation* (New London: Twenty Third, 2008); Holly C. Allen, Christine Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012); Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto, *Generations Together* (Naugatuck: Lifelong Faith, 2014); *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*, ed. Holly C. Allen, (Abilene: ACU Press, 2018); "Intergenerational Mission", Diocese of Hereford Website, accessed 17th September 2020, <https://www.hereford.anglican.org/intergenerational-mission/>; "Supporting Intergenerational Church", The Methodist Church Website, accessed 17th September 2020, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/children-youth-family->

Holly Allen and Christine Ross define intergenerational ministry as taking place ‘when a congregation intentionally brings the generations together in mutual serving, sharing or learning within the core activities of the church in order to live out being the Body of Christ to each other and the greater community’.⁵² One key aspect of this understanding of intergenerational ministry is the acknowledgement of the mutuality of benefit that can be gained from such interaction, including the proposition that children and young people have something to offer older generations. Martyn Payne, writing from a Messy Church perspective, also notes the importance of mutuality of benefit, asserting that that ‘children can also be givers in this process, not just receivers’.⁵³

This article seeks to explore how the traditional understanding of the status of children and young people in a British Baptist ecclesiology may adversely affect the possibility of older generations seeing that children and young people have something to offer older generations and enabling churches to see, as Andy Goodliff proposes, that children are ‘agents in the world and in the church, who need nurture and teaching, but who can also nurture and teach us’.⁵⁴ After an overview of the potential benefits of intergenerational faith formation and summary of the main distinguishing characteristics of British Baptist ecclesiology, there will then follow an exploration of different ways of viewing children in a British Baptist context, namely as part of the body of the church, a members of the Kingdom and a part of the church family. At this point it is worth noting the difficulty in assessing what accepted theology and practices in Baptist churches are, due to the freedom of each church to make their own decisions about such matters. However, although a broad range of views exists across the denomination, there is common ground among most churches who

ministry/intergenerational-ministry/supporting-intergenerational-church/; “New Resource to Help Churches Become Fully Intergenerational”, Baptists Together Website, accessed 17th September 2020, https://baptisttimes.co.uk/Articles/369437/New_Resource_to.aspx .

⁵² Allen & Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 17.

⁵³ Martyn Payne, *Messy Togetherness: Being Intergenerational in Messy Church* (Abingdon: BRF, 2016), 20.

⁵⁴ A. J. Goodliff, *‘To Such as These’: The Child in Baptist Thought* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2012), 25.

would affirm the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle and Five Core Values. This article, due to its reliance on published works, will be limited to the views of published authors who speak from and into a British Baptist context. Most have experience as Baptist ministers and theological education in Baptist colleges, and some of their work was commissioned or arose from the Baptist Union of Great Britain.⁵⁵

Benefits of Intergenerational Faith Formation

Intergenerational faith formation theory stresses the benefits that different generations can receive from interactions with other generations. For children and young people, this is seen as interaction beyond contact with youth and children's group leaders to include the broader church community. Proponents of increased intergenerational faith formation regularly cite biblical support for their stance.

Evidence is found in the multigenerational nature of a number of events, both in the Old Testament (Deut 6:4-9; Deut 29:10-12; Josh 8:34-35; 2 Chr 20:3) and the New Testament (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:31-44; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:1-14; Acts 16:15, 33). Although these passages reinforce the multi-generational nature of faith and life in Old and New Testament times, and the responsibility on older generations to pass on their faith to the younger generations, in reality such examples do not provide compelling evidence for advocating intergenerational faith formation, but rather highlight the more community-based nature of past cultures. These examples fail to emphasize the benefits from meaningful interaction with children that Allen and Ross' definition examined in earlier emphases. The presence of children at multi-generational events is not sufficient in itself. Better examples are to be found in intergenerational relationships such as Samuel and Eli (1 Sam 3), Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19-21; 2 Kgs 2:1-15), Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1-4) and Timothy, Lois and Eunice (2 Tim 1:5). Some New Testament passages have proved to be more relevant, specifically Jesus' call to become like children (Mt 19:13-15; Lk 18:15-17) and Paul's image as the church as the body of Christ (Eph 4:15-16) and these will be examined later in this article.

⁵⁵ The theology and practice advocated in these published works may not correspond with the reality of theology and practice in Baptist churches, given that each church has liberty to interpret the Bible as it sees fit.

Allen and Ross seek further impetus in encouraging intergenerational faith formation by drawing on secular development and social learning theory. They draw on these theories to postulate that when persons of any generation are perennially present only with those who inhabit their own developmental level, it is more difficult to progress to the next stage of development.⁵⁶ Feldmeier also provides support for intergenerational faith formation by highlighting the existence of spiritual growth through the whole life of a person.⁵⁷ Baptist ecclesiology, as shall be examined later, has tended to acknowledge faith development in teenage years and taken less account of the experiences of children. Feldmeier, however, highlights the different nature of spiritual growth within both preschool and primary school aged children, and their willingness to talk and think about God, asserting that to some degree 'children are perhaps more religiously orientated than most adults'.⁵⁸

At the heart of Allen and Ross' argument is the assertion that current experienced levels of intergenerational interaction, primarily in family units and with the leaders of different age specific groups, is insufficient for progression through developmental stages. Further intergenerational interaction will be beneficial and churches should seek to enable this to happen. Sam Richards, referencing situative-sociocultural theory, proposes that people 'learn the ways of a community of practice as they participate authentically and relationally with more experienced members of the culture'.⁵⁹

A key aspect of intergenerational faith formation, and one which has a particular connection with membership and belonging in a Baptist context, is the acknowledgement that benefits between generations can flow both ways. Fiddes, for example, affirms the important role that the church's attitude to children on the way to faith has, asserting that

⁵⁶ Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 96.

⁵⁷ Peter Feldmeier, *The Developing Christian: Spiritual Growth Through the Life Cycle* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007).

⁵⁸ Feldmeier, *Developing Christian*, 90-108.

⁵⁹ Sam Richards, 'Family Picnic: Intergenerational Working' in *Rethinking Children's Work in Churches: A Practical Guide* edited by Carolyn Edwards, Sian Hancock & Sally Nash (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2019), 137.

‘the faith of all cannot grow without listening to their witness’.⁶⁰ He gives a number of examples of how taking children's behaviours, such as crying or laughing in services, into our prayers and worship reminds us of the tears and joys of life. He proposes that children's questions or comments should be seen less as a disturbance but more as a stimulus to our thinking and reflections.

If we accept the need for British Baptist churches to engage in ministries that enable intergenerational faith formation then the question arises as to whether the Baptist understanding of the place of children and young people, especially in regard to membership and belonging, restrict such formation.

Belonging in Baptist Ecclesiology

Stephen Holmes identifies six main elements to the Baptist vision of the church: believers' baptism, the primacy of the local church, congregational church government, the independence and interdependence of local churches, the importance of preaching, and leadership within the church.⁶¹ Of particular relevance to the issue of intergenerational faith formation are the elements of baptism and congregational church governance.

Although believers' baptism is often seen as one of the key aspects of Baptist churches it is not unique to Baptist churches. As Holmes states, ‘the Baptist distinctive is not in baptizing believers, but in refusing to baptize infants, and in generally refusing to recognize the baptism of infants’.⁶² Baptism is seen as a response of an individual in faith and repentance to a gospel call. Holmes notes that British Baptists have been more open to non-Baptists within their fellowships and at their communion table than have American Baptists.

Believers' baptism by immersion is the normal door into membership. For closed membership churches it is the only means to enter, and in open membership churches it remains the expected norm. As Holmes

⁶⁰ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003), 135.

⁶¹ Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 89-118.

⁶² Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 89.

writes, 'baptism is ordinarily accompanied by reception into membership of a particular local church; immersion into the gathered community is the inevitable result of immersion into the water'.⁶³ Membership, in turn, is the means by which congregational church governance is enabled, another distinctive of Baptist ecclesiology. Thus membership, and involvement in congregational church government, is open to those willing and able to be baptized, or for those who in an open membership church have confessed their faith publicly by another means. The implicit message of this is that only members have something of value to add to discerning the mind of Christ within the church, and that others, including children, do not.

Children in Baptist Ecclesiology

In the traditional understanding of Baptist ecclesiology, therefore, the Lordship of Christ is expressed through the local church and the mind of Christ is discerned by the church members in a church members' meeting. This raises the question of the place of children, both in the church and in this discernment process. In the traditional understanding they have a different place in the church to members and no place in the discernment process. They get grouped with those of no faith outside the church even though they may have faith of some form. As Paul Martin points out, 'with children, whatever their quality of faith experience, or whatever their spiritual journey, they do not have the option of being affirmed as members of the church'.⁶⁴

From early Baptist origins their distinctive ecclesiology raised questions about their understanding of the place of children in the church and society. As Anne Dunkley comments, 'in a world where children were of little significance, rejection of infant baptism questioned their status, particularly in Christian families'.⁶⁵ Morris West suggests there is ample evidence that right back to their Anabaptist roots early Baptists were concerned with the relationship

⁶³ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 95.

⁶⁴ Paul W. Martin, 'Towards a Baptist Ecclesiology Inclusive of Children,' *Theology in Context: The occasional journal of a consultation for Baptist doing theology*, Number 1 (Winter 2000): 52.

⁶⁵ Anne Dunkley, *Seen and Heard: Reflections on Children and Baptist Tradition* (Oxford, Whitley Publications, 1999), 18.

between the child and the church.⁶⁶ This later found expression in infant dedication ceremonies, which started to appear towards the start of the twentieth century, becoming common by the end of the 1930s.

The twentieth century saw further reflection on the place of children in Baptist churches, notably in *The Fraternal* and *Baptist Quarterly* issues that preceded and reflected on *The Child and the Church* report in 1966.⁶⁷ Practical changes also were seen in 1960s with the abandonment of afternoon Sunday schools in favour of family church, which Gilmore described in 1963 as where ‘children and parents worship together on Sunday mornings, the children receiving their guidance and instruction apart from their parents, and that worship for both concludes at the same hour’.⁶⁸ Goodliff notes that some Baptists in the 1970s, such as David Tennant, sought to bring further prominence to the issue of children and the church.⁶⁹ Tennant saw belonging in a vicarious way, proposing that a ‘child belongs to a family and if his family belongs to the church, so does he’.⁷⁰ Although it is positive that Tennant raises the issue of children, his understanding of belonging being dependant on parents places limited value on the child, and no value on their faith.

Arising in 1992 from the Baptist Union’s ‘Christian Training Programme’ *Radical Believers*, written by Paul Beasley-Murray, described the Baptist Union’s official understanding of what it meant to be a Baptist.⁷¹ In terms of relating to children it affirms the place of children within a Baptist church and a church’s duty of care, but also marks out limitations of their involvement, both in terms of

⁶⁶ W.M.S. West, *Baptists Together*, (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2000), 89-101.

⁶⁷ Baptist Union of Great Britain, *The Child and the Church. A Baptist Discussion* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1966); G. R. Beasley-Murray, ‘Church and Child in the New Testament,’ *Baptist Quarterly* 21:5 (January 1965): 206-18; R.E. Clements, ‘The Relation of Children to the People of God in the Old Testament,’ *Baptist Quarterly* 21.5 (January 1965): 195-205.

⁶⁸ A Gilmore, ‘Baptist Churches Today and Tomorrow’ in *The Pattern of the Church: A Baptist View*, edited by A. Gilmore (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 123-24.

⁶⁹ Andy Goodliff, ‘Baptists, children and communion’, *Baptist Together*, Autumn (2016) 25.

⁷⁰ David F. Tennant, ‘Children in the Church: A Baptist View, 1978’ in *A Sourcebook For Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990) 385.

⁷¹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being Church*, (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992) 46-48.

discouraging baptism before mid-adolescence and questioning the right of young church members to have the ability to vote in church members' meetings.

In the late 1990s the Baptist Union sought to describe Baptist ecclesiology in a framework that described Baptist people as having certain values, namely being a prophetic, inclusive, sacrificial, missionary and worshipping community.⁷² The value of inclusion identifies a number of barriers to inclusion, of which age is one, and calls for a recovery of the concept of the priesthood of all believers.

A more recent reflection on the discipling of children with Baptist churches, *Encouraging Young Missionary Disciples*, arose from a working group of the Baptist Union Mission Executive.⁷³ In its 2009 document, the group note that the increased employment of children and families' workers and increased awareness of safeguarding issues had compartmentalized children, further separating them from adult church. This resulted in them being more likely to leave the church once they reach adulthood. Of the nine possible ways forward that the group identified, two particularly relate to the topic of intergenerational faith formation. The first was a call on churches to consider both the discipleship and the place of children within church with the aim of enabling them to belong fully to the church community. The second was that consideration should be given by the Baptist Union Council for the establishment of intergenerational communities. Both suggestions encourage new ways to be developed of connecting generations together.

Three metaphors have commonly emerged in reflection around children and belonging in Baptist churches in the twentieth century, namely the metaphors of the church as the body of Christ, the concept of the Kingdom of God, and the church as family.⁷⁴ It is to these metaphors that we now turn our attention.

⁷² *Five Core Values*, Baptists Together, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=117271>.

⁷³ Working Group of the Baptist Union Mission Executive, *Encouraging Young Missionary Disciples*, 2009.

⁷⁴ Body of Christ Metaphor: G. Beasley Murray, "Church and Child in the New Testament" *Baptist Quarterly* 21.5, Jan 1965, 217; Martin J. Lambourne, "Young People – Today's Church, not Tomorrow's", *Fraternal* 198, January 1982, 18; W.M.S. West, *Baptists*

Church as the Body of Christ

A discussion document produced in 1996, *Believing and Being Baptised*, by the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, which included Baptist theologians Christopher Ellis, Paul Fiddes and Nigel Wright, sought to explore theologically the issue of belief and baptism from a Baptist perspective.⁷⁵ Sections ten and eleven of the document indicate that the authors were already aware of the tension between affirming the place of children within the church and the belief that membership of the body of Christ, which is the church, could not occur until a moment of personal faith and commitment.⁷⁶ While affirming that membership of ‘the Body of Christ which is the Church’⁷⁷ is restricted to those with personal faith and commitment to the covenant community, the authors seek to be more creative with some of the biblical metaphors that are used to describe belonging, to illustrate how belonging can occur in different ways. The authors propose a variation on the image of the church as a body by distinguishing between being in the body of Christ and being members of the body. As they state:

Children may certainly be said to be ‘in the Body’ in the sense that they are enfolded and embraced by it; as a baby is enfolded by its mother’s arms, so a child in the church is wrapped around by all the caring and the praying of the community.⁷⁸

Together, (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2000) 107-109, 122-123; Christopher Ellis ed., *Believing and Being Baptised: Baptism, so-called re baptism and children in the church*, (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1996) 41-43; Martin, ‘Towards’, 47-56; Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 133; Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011) 141. Kingdom of God Metaphor: Ellis, *Believing and Being Baptised*, 42; Martin, ‘Towards’, 50; Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 12-19. Church as Family Metaphor: W.M.S. West, ‘The Child and the Church,’ *Fraternal* 119, January 1961, 19; W.T. Cowlan, ‘The Child and the Church’, *The Fraternal* 121, July 1961, 26-29; W.H. Campbell, and L.B. Keeble, ‘Family Church,’ *Fraternal* 134, October 1964, 18-22; David F Tennant, ‘The Child in Communion’, *Fraternal* 173, May 1975, 25-26; Martin J. Lambourne ‘Young People - Today’s church, not Tomorrow’s,’ *Fraternal* 198, January 1982, 18; W.M.S. West, *Baptists Together* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2000), 122; Ellis, *Believing and Being Baptised*, 43-44, Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 133.

⁷⁵ Ellis, *Believing*, 39-46.

⁷⁶ Ellis, *Believing*, 39-45.

⁷⁷ Ellis, *Believing*, 41.

⁷⁸ Ellis, *Believing*, 42.

Nigel Wright notes that this draws on words of a seventeenth century Baptist writer, John Tombes, who wrote that ‘the children of believers are born into the bosom of the Church’.⁷⁹ The authors believe these two ways of belonging, being in the body or being a member of the body, are reflected in the first chapter of Colossians, where in the cosmic sphere all things hold together in Christ (Col 1:17) but Christ is also head of the body, the church (Col 1:18).⁸⁰ They propose that belonging to the church is a process, and that being in the body will help a child to move towards being a member of the body, because to be ‘surrounded by Christian example and Christian teaching is to be drawn continually more deeply into the reality of being “in Christ” until the point of baptism or confirmation in faith as a believer is reached’.⁸¹

In response to *Believing and Being Baptised* Paul Martin, in his article ‘Towards a Baptist Ecclesiology Inclusive of Children’, seeks to challenge some of the conclusions of *Believing and Being Baptised* and present a different understanding of the status of children within Baptist ecclesiology.⁸² He asks how Baptists would view the artwork ‘*Je cherche ton visage*’, a picture of Christ’s head made up of images of individuals of all ages, not just baptized believers. He comments that although helpful models and metaphors of the church that are inclusive of children are presented in *Believing and Being Baptised*, the child still essentially remains “other than” the body, belonging to the body because of the action and initiative of the members of the body’.⁸³ He further notes that unlike other adult non-believers, whose coming to faith can enable them to become part of the body, children, regardless of the faith experiences they have had, are unable to become part of the body of the church. This is to deny, he contends, the validity of those childhood faith experiences, which Martin believes modern faith development theory shows are different from adult experiences but equally valid. He proposes that children’s religious experiences need to be ‘valued on their own terms, rather than from

⁷⁹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 156 fn.5.

⁸⁰ Ellis, *Believing*, 42.

⁸¹ Ellis, *Believing*, 43.

⁸² Martin, “Towards”, 47-57.

⁸³ Martin, “Towards”, 48.

the perspective of adult experience and expression'.⁸⁴ This, Martin proposes, should see its practical expression in seeking to listen to children, who can offer 'insight, common sense and prophetic direction'.⁸⁵ Martin identifies two aspects of Baptist ecclesiology, namely the church being a community of the baptized and church governance by all church members, which make it difficult to include children. Martin notes that although *Believing and Being Baptized* seeks to find ways of including children, it acknowledges that in order to remain true to the idea of church being a covenanted community, a clear divide will exist between those in membership and those not eligible for membership.⁸⁶ The question, remains, however, what nature this divide must take and what language should be used. As he writes, the effect on non-members of the language of membership is negative in that 'it suggests not only that they belong in a different way, but also that they belong in a deficient or inferior way'.⁸⁷

Paul Fiddes, one of the contributors to *Believing and Being Baptized*, explores the area of Baptist identity in his own book, *Tracks and Traces*, and responds to Martin's critique of *Believing and Being Baptized*.⁸⁸ Fiddes acknowledges that a number of groups, including believing children, are excluded by historical views of membership and baptism, and Fiddes is keen for Baptists to face up to the challenge of 'how to be an open and hospitable people while keeping baptism for believers only'.⁸⁹ He specifically explores issues relating to those children who have been presented as an infant and have a faith, but have not yet been baptized. He reaffirms the image from *Believing and Being Baptized* that a child can belong by being embraced by the body of the church.

Fiddes turns his attention, as Martin does, to those children who are not journeying to faith but are journeying within faith. Here Fiddes wrestles with the inclusion of believing children in the body while wanting to postpone baptism until the full implications of discipleship is understood. He affirms that 'they are more than embraced in the

⁸⁴ Martin, "Towards", 52.

⁸⁵ Martin, "Towards", 56.

⁸⁶ Martin, "Towards", 48.

⁸⁷ Martin, "Towards", 56.

⁸⁸ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 134-139.

⁸⁹ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 126.

body; they *form* part of the body that embraces others'.⁹⁰ He proposes that they can be seen as members of the body but 'have not yet covenanted with other members; they are not on the roll of disciples available for service'.⁹¹ Indeed, for Fiddes, their absence from the body would leave it incomplete, and he states, perhaps referring back to Martin's image reflection on '*Je cherche ton visage*,' that 'the face of Christ will have empty patches if the features they supply are missing'.⁹² It is not just their presence in the body that Fiddes seeks to encourage, but also to understand that they have something to offer adults, as 'Christ wants to show himself to us through them'.⁹³

Nigel Wright, another of the contributors to *Believing and Being Baptised*, expands on his own thinking in chapter seven of his book, *Free Church, Free State*.⁹⁴ He echoes many of the points made by *Believing and Being Baptised* and writings of Paul Fiddes. Like Fiddes, he uses the image of children being enfolded by the body of the church, and encourages churches to create an environment where children find a 'welcoming and hospitable space for them'.⁹⁵ He also seeks to redesignate 'believers' baptism' as 'baptism of disciples'.⁹⁶ Indeed, Wright goes so far as to say that 'the common designation of the church as the "fellowship of believers"', while not untrue, is also not true enough'.⁹⁷ These authors are attempting to mitigate against the disadvantages of not being members of the body by both softening the concept of the body of the church and by affirming that even those outside the body have something to contribute. Yet the tension, between being in the body and being not in the body, remains.

Membership of the Kingdom of God

The authors of *Believing and Being Baptised* note that the concept of the Kingdom of God is wider than just the church, and that the sphere of

⁹⁰ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 136.

⁹¹ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 139.

⁹² Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 139.

⁹³ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 139.

⁹⁴ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 138-48.

⁹⁵ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 146.

⁹⁶ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 141.

⁹⁷ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 140.

God's rule is not limited to those within the church.⁹⁸ The authors affirm that although those who are enfolded are not members of the body, this does not mean that the members cannot learn from those enfolded or that they have nothing to contribute. Indeed, as Jesus pointed out (Matt 18:14) we need to learn about the nature of the Kingdom from children. The authors conclude their argument by stressing the need to see positions in church in a more fluid way: 'we ought to think of moving boundaries between the states of being "in Christ," "in the Body" and "members of the Body," and we ought not to be over-confident about drawing the lines of demarcation'.⁹⁹

Martin goes further by asserting that the child relates primarily to the Kingdom, rather than the church, and this should be the defining way by which they are understood to be included.¹⁰⁰ Echoing the words of Jesus (Mk 10:14-15), Martin asserts that children belong to the Kingdom because they are children, and it is adults who need to be converted to the Kingdom by becoming like children. This image removes the need to seek ways to enable the inclusion of children, and rather it is now adults who need including.

In the last decade two major contributions to the area of the place of children in British Baptist churches have looked at relationship of children and the Kingdom, namely Haddon Willmer and Keith White, in *Entry Point*, and Andrew (Andy) Goodliff, in *To Such as These*.¹⁰¹

In *Entry Point* Willmer and White seek to explore the theological implications of Jesus' action in Matthew 18 of putting a child in the midst of the disciples. Chapter Two of the book seeks to explore the Kingdom implications of Jesus' action, noting that the disciples' preconceptions about what a Kingdom entails, namely structure, power and status, is challenged by the placing of a child in their midst.¹⁰² A child would not normally have an elevated place in a structured, power and status driven kingdom, so Jesus' placing of the child in their midst speaks of a different sort of kingdom. As Willmer

⁹⁸ Ellis, *Believing*, 42.

⁹⁹ Ellis, *Believing*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ Martin, "Towards", 56.

¹⁰¹ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 7-19; Haddon Wilmer and Keith J White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*, (London: WTL, 2013).

¹⁰² Wilmer and White, *Entry Point*, 47-76.

and White state the ‘child signs the kingdom of God by being there as a personal, embodied, present, practical invitation to others to receive her’.¹⁰³ It is this question of how a child is received within a Baptist church that challenges current practice and the understood place of children within a local church context.

Goodliff’s book draws on Jesus’ interaction with children in Mark 10. He seeks to discern changes in the understanding of the place of children in British Baptist churches through the development of infant presentation liturgies from the start of the twentieth century. At the heart of each liturgy is the account of the bringing of children to Jesus and his response (Mk 10:13-16), and from this Goodliff seeks balance between the more child inclusive concept of the belonging to the Kingdom and the more excluding doctrine of salvation which emphasises repentance and commitment. Goodliff contends that children are included in ‘blessing of the Kingdom and the new community of God, until they deem themselves otherwise’.¹⁰⁴ Thus, like Martin, Goodliff sees the inclusion of all children in the blessing and community of God, but adds that their exclusion is voluntary.

The placing of the Kingdom as the primary metaphor on which to determine the place of children within a church, therefore, creates a reverse situation compared to the body metaphor. In the Kingdom metaphor children belong, but with the opportunity over time to opt out of the church, and with the body metaphor children do not belong, but have the opportunity over time to opt in to the church. Each metaphor seeks to enable children to become disciples of Christ, but understands that journey differently. In terms of intergenerational faith formation, the Kingdom metaphor provides more reason to value the contributions of children to the faith life of the church. Yet in Baptist ecclesiology, the metaphor of the Kingdom is not one that is stressed beyond infant presentation liturgies, as seen by the emphasis on membership through baptism being the door into belonging, rather than through an infant dedication service.

¹⁰³ Wilmer and White, *Entry Point*, 168.

¹⁰⁴ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 17.

Church as Family

A further metaphor that is increasingly used to describe church is that of family. The Doctrine and Worship Committee noted in passing this image of church, using the King James translation of Galatians 6:10 as ‘household of faith’, describing it as a ‘space in which people can dwell in different ways’.¹⁰⁵

Paul Martin, being keen to encourage the reconsideration of the assumption that boundaries of belonging have to be closed, also draws on the image of church as family, a household of faith, describing how a family can invite friends to share their communal life without those friends having to become family.¹⁰⁶ For Martin, the metaphor of family is a helpful way to encourage a more open view of boundaries, where baptized disciples don’t constitute the body but rather create a centre of gravity for the body.

Paul Fiddes also reflects on the idea of households of faith that welcome and embrace visitors while family members remain a distinct group.¹⁰⁷ Fiddes acknowledges that the boundary of baptized believers exists, but sees it as ‘an open boundary, with plenty of room for hospitality and for travellers passing in and out’.¹⁰⁸ Specifically for children he stresses that infant thanksgiving can open the fence around the church community. However, although Fiddes’ views are a positive step towards acknowledging that different groups, and generations, have something to offer to each other, the initiative of welcome and embrace still comes for the members of the church, reinforcing their privileged position in the church, and describing more an act of grace and generosity on their part than an acknowledgement of mutual needs.

Goodliff also explores the metaphor of church as family.¹⁰⁹ Although his particular reference is to the wider Baptist family and how churches

¹⁰⁵ Ellis, *Believing*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Martin, “Towards”, 50, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 133.

¹⁰⁸ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 132.

¹⁰⁹ Andy Goodliff, “The Language of Baptist Family”, *Baptist Quarterly*, 44:6 (2012) 344-353.

relate within the Baptist Union, his observations can be applied to a local church context. For example, he notes that if a body is in conflict with itself, it will lead to illness, but conflict within a family can lead to a positive outcome.

Viewing church a family has the same benefit that, according to Nigel Wright, paedobaptism offers, namely that they are 'included by extension within the covenant community of God's own people'.¹¹⁰ It thus provides a way of valuing all members, while acknowledging their different standing within the family. In a good family everyone's voices are heard and, in a church context, this would provide good grounds for intergenerational faith formation.

These three metaphors, of body, kingdom and family, have provided fruitful ways for Baptists to explore the place of children and young people in church. None of the metaphors provide a stand-alone way of understanding the place of children in church, but each contains important elements that suggest practical ways forward.

Practical Applications

As ways forward are explored it is important to note that many of the authors quoted did not have opportunities at the time they were writing to put their theories into practice. Paul Martin became a Regional Minister soon after writing his article, Paul Fiddes was and remains an academic based at Oxford University, and Nigel Wright and Paul Beasley-Murray were both principals of Spurgeon's College at the time of their work being published. Only Andy Goodliff wrote whilst being actively involved in local church ministry, initially as a Minister in Training and latterly as minister at Belle Vue Baptist Church in Southend-On-Sea.

As noted earlier, a key condition for intergenerational faith formation to occur is that each generation represented in a church acknowledges that the other generations have something to offer them, particularly in the realm of faith development. In addition, opportunities need to exist to allow intergenerational faith formation to take place. Such opportunities require that children are not merely welcomed and

¹¹⁰ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 138.

accommodated, but included and involved in Baptist churches and their ministries in a significant way. The survey of the above Baptist theologians demonstrates the difficulties that present themselves in a Baptist ecclesiology when one is seeking increased inclusion and involvement of children. The Baptist authors considered above all wish to acknowledge the importance of welcoming children in Baptist churches, but if churches are going to go beyond either evangelizing or entertaining children, being welcomed is only a first step.

Two main ways forward emerge from the Baptist authors we have explored. The first is a reassessment of the nature and validity of childhood faith, and how participation in Sunday services, in particular communion and membership, might apply to children. The second is the concept of a catechumenate period. These will now be explored in more depth.

New Ways of Viewing Children

Fiddes' image of the church body embracing the child is helpful in that it both maintains the church body as being made up of baptized believers (1 Cor 12:13) but welcomes and embraces children into the body. Also helpful is his stress on what children can offer, and this corresponds with the requirements of intergenerational faith formation, which also emphasises two-way interaction and mutual learning between younger and older members of the church. Yet, in Fiddes' image, the child and the body of the church remain separate, and the initiative for the child's inclusion rests solely in the generous action of the body. However generous this might be, children of faith who are deemed unable to be baptized are excluded from the most fundamental means of belonging in Baptist churches, that being through church membership. Constitutionally, membership commonly confers two responsibilities within a British Baptist church, the opportunity to seek the mind of Christ within the church members' meeting and the opportunity to serve on a church's leadership team. In practice members also tend to be those who are the obvious choice for preaching, leading worship and having positions of authority in the church. These opportunities are denied to children and unbaptized young people.

Goodliff's work has a strong link with intergenerational faith formation theory through his strong emphasis that welcoming children is not enough in itself, that in addition, a church should be one that also 'recognises, affirms and listens to them as fellow pilgrims on the journey of faith'.¹¹¹ He develops this view in his article 'Celebrating Diversity' which encourages churches so see that children have much to offer, such as 'the joy of life, a model of trust, a desire to learn'.¹¹² This should see expression both in the baptism of children once they demonstrate faith, regardless of whether or not they are in their mid-teens, and their full participation in communion.¹¹³

A group within Baptist Union, the Children, Young People and Family Roundtable, is currently seeking to challenge thinking away from the traditional views on children, encouraging churches to move away from being a 'dismembered body/church where children and young people are not invited to join in'.¹¹⁴ The inference here is that children are indeed part of the body of Christ, the church, in its fullest way. Generally, these changes have centred around children's participation in communion and increased emphasis on all-age worship and talks.

Intergenerational faith formation, therefore, will require a transformed view of how childhood faith is understood. A perspective offered in the official Baptist Union magazine, *Baptists Together*, by Andrew Ginn, connects Jesus' prayer from the cross for those who will believe in him (Jn 17:20-21) with Jesus' description of little children who believe in him (Mt 18:6) in order to broaden an understanding of what constitutes faith.¹¹⁵ He comments that 'as Baptists, we tend to put an emphasis on that belief as a reasoned, informed response to God's grace'.¹¹⁶ A broader view of faith enables a broader view of belonging. It is interesting to note that the biblical passages generally used by proponents of increased intergenerational faith formation, such as

¹¹¹ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 58.

¹¹² Andrew Goodliff, 'Celebrating Diversity: Towards an inclusive church', *Baptist Quarterly* 43:1 (2009): 30.

¹¹³ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 46-50.

¹¹⁴ Children, Young People and Families Round Table – October 2019, accessed on 10th February 2020.

https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/562736/Children_Young_People.aspx

¹¹⁵ Andrew Ginn, 'Valuing Children in our churches', *Baptists Together* Spring (2020): 40.

¹¹⁶ Ginn, 'Valuing Children', 40.

these passages, are not the ones used by Baptist theologians as they reflect on the place of children. Intergenerational faith formation writers seem to approach the area of children in church from a significantly differing perspective. Whereas Baptist theologians seek to discover how children fit in to their understanding of church, intergenerational faith formation writers seek to discover how church can fit in to their understanding of children. An interaction between these two approaches may be helpful.

Kathie Amidei draws on the faith developmental theory of John Westerhoff, in identifying four stages on the journey of developing faith throughout life, with particular reference to faith in children.¹¹⁷ She contends that the first stage, experienced faith, where faith is essentially borrowed, is common in preschool and early childhood. The second stage, affiliative faith, is based on a sense of belonging and being accepted in a faith community, can begin with intermediate childhood. The third stage, searching faith, which often begins in late adolescence, is followed by the last stage, owned or mature faith. Such a view of faith development in children is at odds with traditional Baptist ecclesiology in two ways. First, traditionally stage two, belonging, as expressed through membership and baptism, follows owned faith, stage four. Secondly, traditionally Baptist ecclesiology would formally and institutionally acknowledge only owned faith, and would label the previous stages not as being on the way to faith.¹¹⁸

Enabling intergenerational faith formation, therefore, may require a re-evaluation of the validity of faith development in pre-teenager children and consideration of an accompanying relaxation of restrictions on who can take communion and reconsideration of the timing of baptism. Yet, to change such restrictions can be seen to weaken the theology behind them, namely the importance of owned faith. Attempts to be more inclusive of children and young people reveal underlying tensions of timing. The earlier children are baptized, the less the issue of exclusion exists. However, early baptism carries with it

¹¹⁷ Amidei, Merhaut, and Roberto, *Generations Together*, 64-66.

¹¹⁸ It is interesting to note that in a recent intergenerational bible study course run at my church one adult participant said in the focus group evaluation of the course that they were 'inspired by some of the responses of the young people' even though four out of the five young people are at the searching faith stage.

the risk that the candidate is not ready for baptism. One resolution to this tension may be a catechumenate period, where children are seen, as Goodliff puts it, as ‘those intentionally being gathered into the life of the church towards baptism’.¹¹⁹ This concept will now be explored.

Catechumenate

The adoption of a catechumenate stage in faith development would be to introduce a new concept to most British Baptist churches. Although it is not a new idea in Baptist writing, Goodliff notes that ‘despite being fairly pervasive in the literature, it has not been widely taken up’.¹²⁰ A revised edition of *Radical Believer* published in 2006 sees no fundamental alterations to the views stated in the earlier edition, but does have the addition of a more detailed exploration of how the concept of catechumenate, seen by Beasley-Murray as a programme of instruction to lead from a child's conversion to their baptism, could acknowledge a child's faith, while reserving baptism until later.¹²¹ This perhaps indicates that for Beasley-Murray, despite increased discussion on the understanding of the place of children in the years between publications, no significance change had been embraced by Baptist churches. Wright seeks, as did Beasley-Murray, to bridge the gap between childhood faith and mid-teen baptism by designating children as catechumens, those under faith instruction leading to baptism.¹²² Martin also suggests drawing on the concept of catechumenates as a way of acknowledging that those who have begun the journey of faith, but have not yet reached the point of baptism, do indeed have a place within the life of church.¹²³ Goodliff also advocates children as catechumens and includes an appendix in *To such as these* outlining what this might look like.¹²⁴

Many British Baptist churches may unconsciously already have an roughly formed catechetical programme involving Sunday school teaching, visits to Christian festivals like Soul Survivor for young

¹¹⁹ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 49.

¹²⁰ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 45.

¹²¹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being Church* (2nd Ed., Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2006) 61-64.

¹²² Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 140-41.

¹²³ Martin, “Towards”, 50-51.

¹²⁴ Goodliff, *To Such as These*, 77-78.

people and baptism and membership courses. By formalizing such programmes and introducing intergenerational elements to them, we could potentially increase their effectiveness and change people's understanding of the place of children and young people within church.

Concluding Comments

If these metaphors and practical applications suggest that ecclesiology may be a contributing factor to the limitation of intergenerational faith formation in Baptist churches, the question arises as to whether other denominations have ecclesiologies that are more conducive to the growth of intergenerational ministry. Much development of intergenerational faith formation theory has originated from paedobaptist denominations, and this may suggest that in these denominations there is a clearer sense of the child belonging in the church and hence more openness amongst adults to current developments in intergenerational ministry.¹²⁵ Equally, developments in intergenerational practice in the UK have also often originated from paedobaptist denominations, the most notable being the Anglican intergenerational initiative, Messy Church.¹²⁶

However, many of the metaphors and practical application explored above have similarities to arguments that have been offered in support of paedobaptism. Darren Philip notes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view that through paedobaptism a child is incorporated into the church community, and this community then keeps the child as part of the community by carrying it like a mother.¹²⁷ Alec Motyer uses the

¹²⁵ For example, of the twenty-six contributors to *InterGenerate*, which arose out of the InterGenerate conference (Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee, 2017), three-quarters of the contributors who have denominational affiliation are from churches that baptize infants (Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist and Anglican) and a third were from those that emphasise believers' baptism (Church of Christ, Baptist).

¹²⁶ The only intergenerational conference in the UK to date, *Altogether Now*, was run by the Methodist Church.

¹²⁷ Darren Philip, "Children in an Intergenerational Church Community: Lessons from the Church of Scotland from the Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" (MTh dissn, University of Aberdeen, 2020) <http://ascend.churchofscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Children-in-an-Intergenerational-Church-Community.pdf>;

metaphor of the kingdom of God and Jesus' blessing of children from Mark 10:13-16 to support a biblical mandate for paedobaptism.¹²⁸ John Stott also quotes Bonhoeffer, noting his view on the importance of the catechumenate and caring for children in the life of the church.¹²⁹ Martyn Payne, writing for Messy Church, draws on the image of households of faith.¹³⁰ Such similarities reflect the same aim of paedobaptists and credobaptists, namely to enable children to grow into disciples of Christ, but show different understandings of the timing of baptism, and hence the time at which faith journeys and belonging to the church are seen to start, and this may be a key difference. In terms of intergenerational faith formation, and especially in terms of older generation seeing younger generations contributions in the area of faith, an early perceived start on a faith journey in a paedobaptist ecclesiology should be a impetus to intergenerational faith formation.

Yet even if evidence suggests that ecclesiologies based around paedobaptism are more conducive to the intergenerational ministry, this does not mean that churches in these denominations have embraced these opportunities. For example, Darren Philip, writing in the Church of Scotland context, notes that even though over ninety percent of baptisms in 2018 in the Church of Scotland were of infants, only around six percent of the children present in church services received Holy Communion, even though this has been permitted in the Church of Scotland since 1992.¹³¹ Yet evidence does exist for the growth of intergenerational ministry in paedobaptist churches. Bob Jackson notes that in the UK the levels of attendance by children at Anglican and Methodist churches have declined significantly in the last 100 years so that the numbers of children in each denomination are similar to those in Baptist churches.¹³² Yet he also notes that the take

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 241.

¹²⁸ John Stott and J. Alec Motyer, *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, (London: Latimer Trust, 2008), 45.

¹²⁹ Stott & Motyer, *Infant Baptism*, 21; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1957), 47, 179.

¹³⁰ Payne, *Messy Togetherness*, 40-41.

¹³¹ Philip, "Children", 16-17.

¹³² Bob Jackson, "From Sunday School to Messy Church: a new movement for our age?", in *Messy Church Theology: Exploring the significance of Messy Church for the wider church*, ed. George Lings (Abingdon: BRF, 2013) 139.

up of the intergenerational initiative Messy Church has been highest among Anglicans and Methodists.

Is ecclesiology, therefore, a significant contributing factor to a reduced view of the contribution young people can make to the faith life of the church and the adoption of intergeneration ministry, or are other factors more important? Allen and Ross, writing in a North American context, identify societal pressures, developmental and life-stage concerns, church growth strategies and individualism as key factors in the segregation of children from church life, rather than ecclesiology, and these factors must be acknowledged in a UK context too.¹³³ However, while acknowledging that ecclesiology may not be the key cause of limited intergenerational ministry in UK churches, I would argue that moves towards more intergenerational interaction can be influenced by it. Six years after the publication of *To Such as These*, having become a Baptist minister and a father, Goodliff acknowledges the challenges he has found in putting these theories into practice.¹³⁴ He has not implemented his more radical suggestions, such as baptizing children at the first signs of faith and allowing children to take communion. In part this is because of changes in Goodliff's thinking, as he is no longer certain if a child's faith is best nurtured by immediate baptism rather than a child being seen as being in some form of pre-baptism catechumenate state. In addition, the reality of church life meant that his church didn't feel it was right for children to take bread and wine, and instead children take biscuits and grapes at alternate communion services. Goodliff concludes that there is a need to 'develop more rites before and after baptism'.¹³⁵ The experience of Goodliff in a local church context is indicative of the difficulties in changing the view of a church on such fundamental rites as baptism and communion.

Martin paints a picture of what an ideal church community would look like: 'In this community, people of all ages are given to one another. They are invited by God to share their faith journeys together; to listen

¹³³ Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 35-46

¹³⁴ Goodliff, "Baptists, children and communion", 24-25.

¹³⁵ Goodliff, "Baptists, children and communion", 25.

to one another's stories; and to find in one another gifts of God for the whole community'.¹³⁶

In such a church, intergenerational faith formation would occur. Yet Martin's vision has not been fully realized within British Baptist churches in the twenty years since he first described it. The adoption of Messy Church into the life of many Baptist churches may be a sign that this is changing and the significant literature produced by the Messy Church movement may further encourage Baptist churches.¹³⁷ How far Messy Church values will impact on other aspects of Baptist Church life is yet to be seen. What is clear is that further reflection is needed to find a way to stay true to core Baptist beliefs, yet also acknowledge the place that intergenerational faith formation has in churches. Our survey of the discussions in the area over the past fifty years, and the limited progress that ministers like Goodliff have been able to achieve, suggest that any change will be gradual.

Notes on Contributor

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¹³⁶ Martin, "Towards", 54.

¹³⁷ Lings, ed., *Messy Church Theology*; Paul Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church: growing faith in an all-age community*, (Abingdon: BRF,2013); Payne, *Messy Togetherness*; Ian Paul, ed., *Being Messy, Being Church: Exploring the Direction of Travel for Today's Church*, (Abingdon: BRF,2017).

***Renewing a Modern Denomination* by Andy Goodliff: Review Symposium¹³⁸**

Paul S. Fiddes, Lina Toth, Tony Peck and Andy Goodliff

Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination: A study of Baptist Institutional Life in the 1990s*. Monographs in Baptist History (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020)

Paul Fiddes, University of Oxford

This book has given me the kind of gift that one might expect from eternity—I mean being able to *re-live* past events with the hope of redeeming the past. I must say at the beginning that this book is an achievement which I appreciate and admire. Andy Goodliff is right to select the decade of the 1990s as a key one in the modern history of the Baptist movement in the UK, and future historians will confirm his judgement. They will also never be able to do without his pioneering work, to which he has brought clear sight and sharp analysis. He deftly combines close attention to written documents, a survey of movements, and the drawing of personality portraits. He traces the detail of texts, and also the sweep of influence over the years. I believe he is right in his basic thesis: that the success of one particular trend in the 1990s has had its outworking in the present situation of a substantially de-nationalized denomination. Nothing else I want to say, as a participant in these events related, should undermine the fact that this book is essential reading for all who care about Baptist identity, and it should become a standard text for the period. But I know that he would want me to raise questions, and I do so in a supportive spirit.

The first question, I think, is over the basic division of the movements of thought and action in the period into two ‘streams of renewal’, named ‘denomination-building’ and ‘theological’ renewal respectively. It is a good lens, and it enables close examination as all lenses do. It is a way of looking, and in its own way it is convincing. But of course,

¹³⁸ The symposium was held under the auspices of the Centre of Baptist Studies in Oxford and the Baptist Historical Society as an online lunchtime seminar on 26th February 2021.

Andy himself registers its limits, in that the participants in each movement do share the concerns of the other. He shows that while the ‘theological’ trend is shaped by the idea of *covenant*, and the ‘denominational’ trend by a passion for *mission*, yet the two overlap all the time. Paul Beasley-Murray’s *Radical Believers*, a book from the Mainstream stable, considers church membership as a covenant relationship (see *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, p.32, n.55). I might also cite a letter from my own files, in which Douglas McBain, doyen of the ‘mission’ movement, expresses gratitude for the attention given to covenant in the document on the *Nature of the Assembly and the Council*, and celebrates what he calls ‘consistent *theological* development for the Baptist Union’.¹³⁹ In fact, the Doctrine and Worship Committee that produced the report on the *Nature of the Assembly* had been carefully chosen by the nominating committee of the Baptist Union to include representatives from all streams of the denomination, including Mainstream.

On the other hand, what we might call the ‘covenant-group’ based their thinking on a vision of the Mission of God (*missio dei*), as Andy makes clear. The four college principals within the group were involved in a new development of building deeper structural relations between the colleges and their neighbouring associations. They also engaged in conversation with the Mission Department of the Union to try to integrate research in practical theology in the colleges with the work of the Department. One of them, Brian Haymes, chaired the report into superintendency, to which Andy gives a lot of attention. All this surely comes under the heading of ‘denomination-building’.

Another way of looking at the issue would be to say that there were two different *theologies*, two different ecclesiologies going on. Andy himself provides other ways of describing the contrasts between the two movements. I prefer the distinction between an ecclesiology of ‘strategic alliance’ and that of ‘covenant’, which Andy himself identifies (p.125). I recall from the days of the denominational consultation of 1996 that I and my companions in the covenant group were immediately struck by a phrase used by Tom Houston in his address, which spoke of the need for Baptists in the present day to make ‘strategic alliances’ (cf p.103). We saw our talk about covenant as being

¹³⁹ Letter, Douglas McBain to Paul Fiddes, 2 September 1995.

the counterpoint to that idea. The church—whether manifest locally or in association or in union—was not just an alliance for certain strategic and pragmatic purposes, such as mission, but was being drawn together by the covenant-maker who is Christ. Sometimes, when others used the word ‘covenant’, we suspected that what was meant was a ‘strategic alliance’. If I were to characterize two trends or movements, that would be the distinction I would draw: ‘covenant or strategic alliance’, not ‘theology or denomination-building’.

A second question is triggered, not by the main text of the book, but by Stephen Holmes’ preface; there he remarks that Baptist voices about either mission or covenant tend to assume that these are straightforward biblical concepts, where they are not. It is worth saying that the covenant group never thought that it was espousing a theology of covenant that was simply justified by scripture. As Andy points out, there was a strong sense that the concept of covenant had been shaped by Baptist tradition in the past; our ancestors had introduced novel elements that were not simply in the Bible: the very notion of the covenant of the triune God with a local church exceeds biblical parameters. Andy suggests that in the *Covenant 21 Service*, ‘For the first time it is stated that the making of covenant between church members was ‘a *development* of the biblical concept of covenant’ (p.127, my italics). But in the report of the Doctrine and Worship Committee on the churches’ responses to its *Assembly and Council* document, it had already asserted that ‘The report...was concerned to develop a *new vision of covenant relationship* for today, based on scripture and on the insights of our Baptist forebears’.¹⁴⁰

Thus, beyond even past tradition, the group was now extending concepts of covenant to cover a more catholic understanding of the church as well as the activity of God in society outside the church. The covenant group was well aware that it was offering a theology of covenant shaped by *contemporary* concerns, such as ecumenism, the multifaith context and an increasingly secular world. While it saw itself as retrieving a genuine element of Baptist identity which had been neglected it was also developing the idea of covenant for the present

¹⁴⁰ Document: Responses to the Report, ‘The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain’, 15 May 1995, para. 7.

day. It has to be admitted, however, that to communicate its vision to other Baptists, the group tended to stress the element of retrieval.

Another question of historical judgement is Andy's fascinating suggestion that the theological renewal group should have taken up the 1996 document called *Five Core Values for a Gospel People*; this, he thinks, might have been 'the means of holding mission and covenant together in a meaningful way'. He judges that neither myself nor Brian Haymes make any 'mention of the core values in *Tracks and Traces* or *On Being the Church* or any other subsequent work' and so an opportunity was missed (pp.133–4). I think it is worth underlining that, as Andy himself observes (p.132), the Covenant 21 Service—for which I was on the preparation group—integrates the making of a covenant with the *Five Core Values*, which are listed in the declaration called 'I serve'. I agree that it is important to bring together the perspectives of covenant and the *Five Core Values*, and I believe that Covenant 21 was the ideal vehicle to do this in, though I take his point that this should also have been done extensively elsewhere. He is quite right in his judgement here. I might add, however, that it is not quite right to say that I do not make mention *anywhere* else of *Five Core Values*. In my published reply to the Methodist David Carter's review of *Tracks and Traces*, which Andy mentions (p.130), I write as follows: 'Statements which place mission in a theological context will also win wide consent, as with the document approved by Council called *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* which has become a kind of manifesto for Baptist Churches. This document also shows that Council can act creatively in reinterpreting Baptist tradition for the present'.¹⁴¹ I should add that *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* itself begins with the language of covenant, stating that the Union is a 'covenanting' together of churches, associations and colleges.

Any qualifications I have ventured to make to Andy's account are, however, trifling in face of the undoubted achievement of the whole. He must be right that, while the adoption of covenant *language* in the denomination has been widespread, covenant *theology* has had much less impact. I think that he may go a little too far in judging that the document *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council*, which argued for a covenantal understanding of the Union, was 'not received well' in

¹⁴¹ *Ecclesiology* 1, no. 3 (2005), 99.

wider Baptist life beyond the Council (p.118). My archives contain over 150 responses from local Baptist churches, Associations and Colleges to the Report and its companion-piece, a 'Green Paper on Restructuring', together with analyses of the data by Susan Grote. This was perhaps the most thorough-going theological audit of the denomination that was attempted in modern times, and though reception was definitely mixed, 60% of the responses were favourable to conceiving both associations and the Baptist Union to be covenantal in nature. However, Andy's main point is that, for the most part, acceptance of the covenant idea remained a matter of Baptist vocabulary, rather than making a thorough-going impression on Baptist life.

I myself remain convinced that the idea of covenant has urgent importance, not just for the shape of the church but for cooperating with the activity of God *outside* the church, where God has many covenant relations of which we are scarcely aware. In my own thought, covenant has increasingly become an understanding that the whole universe exists in the fellowship of the triune God. As I wrote as early as *Tracks and Traces*, when conceived imaginatively, covenant is 'as wide as the world'.

Lina Toth, Scottish Baptist College

Why has a Lithuanian residing in Scotland been asked to offer her reflections on a book that explores a recent episode in the life of the Baptist Union of Great Britain? Perhaps *because* she is a Lithuanian and serves a neighbourly Baptist Union, and so presumably brings an external perspective on the issues that Andy Goodliff's volume is concerned with. At least that is how I have taken this invitation. Indeed, if we are to understand ourselves, we need the perspective of an outsider, so to speak. That is as true of ourselves as persons as it is of churches and denominations.

However, if I am an outsider, then I am one of a peculiar kind. While I have never been directly part of the life of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB), I have had the privilege of knowing a number of the living subjects of this book. As they represent both 'streams', to use the main category employed in this volume, it had been fascinating to hear and see, over the years, their reflections and perspectives on the

life of the Union; on what, in their understanding, constituted the core of Baptist identity; and what, to their minds, were the key challenges which the Union had been facing in the period under the consideration. I will reflect on the role of oral and informal input later, but at this point would simply observe that it is through their eyes and because of their, at times quite divergent, perspectives, and their care and concern for the denomination, that I became drawn to, and interested in, the life of this Baptist Union. Moreover, through my role at the Scottish Baptist College—which counts itself as one of BUGB’s Colleges—there is a direct connection to the life of this ecclesial body. Geographical (and to some extent cultural) distance can make relating a little more difficult at times, but the links, both institutional and personal, are long-standing, meaningful, and fruitful. Thus if I am an outsider, then I am a friendly one, holding a deep interest in this particular expression of church life.

A couple more things need to be noted about the perspective with which I have engaged this work. First, for a good portion of my life I have been privileged to relate to wider associational structures of Baptist life, such as the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance, and have come to see how often for Baptists across different unions and countries, translocal relationships can be fraught with difficulties, and reflect rather divergent ecclesial suppositions. Secondly, the volume made me think again of the grouping of Baptist believers in which my own life of faith began. Although the Baptist Union in Lithuania is tiny in comparison, even today it would in many ways reflect the same central issues that are identified in *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, particularly in terms of the tension between mission and theological identity, and the debate about which of these should be *the* organizing principle. Thinking about BUGB in comparison to this Baptist body also reminded me how much church life, and denominational life, is shaped by its key players and their particular life stories, passions, and experiences, and indeed at times significant changes of perspective, if not outright ‘conversions’ to a different theological vision. We get a glimpse of some of these individual interests or experiences in *Renewing a Modern Denomination*: stories such as Nigel Wright’s interest in anabaptism due to a visit to a Mennonite community, or Douglas McBain’s befriending a

Benedictine monk and becoming, somewhat surprisingly, a supporter of ecumenical relations extending beyond the evangelical circles.¹⁴² One's attitude to the Union can also undergo a change, such as Wright's eventual self-description as of 'something of a denominationalist' compared to his starting point of critiquing the Union 'from the edges'.¹⁴³ In a different way, Rob Warner's story has led him from active involvement in Mainstream and its aim to transform the Union, to disillusionment and re-embracing of Anglicanism.¹⁴⁴ Thus it is not by chance that the author has described his project as 'a study of four of the most influential figures of that period'¹⁴⁵— although working out who the 'most influential figures' really are in a particular grouping or period may not always be that straightforward. But the main players explored in this book, and their life stories, had an obvious impact on the life of the union, and as such no doubt deserve further scholarly attention.

Renewing a Modern Denomination is an illustration of the challenge of organizing the theological and practical concerns and the events of a relatively short historical period. I would suggest that perhaps the challenge is particularly evident because of how short the period is, and how alive it still is in the memories of many. The need for the consideration of a longer period of history becomes apparent at a number of points, particularly on such issues as superintendency which necessitated a whole section on 'The History of Superintendency'.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, the chapter on superintendency and associations is a reminder that other interpretative lenses could be applied, such as an investigation of the theology and practice of Baptist leadership and leadership structures across different levels of organisation. We get glimpses of such a lens in the occasional reference to specific leadership expectations in relation to such figures as the General Secretary of the Union—particularly colourfully expressed in the longing for a 'great man' type of a leader, quote, 'marshalling and encouraging the troops as Mountbatten did in

¹⁴² Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination: A Study of Baptist Institutional Life in the 1990s* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 66-67; 141.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 158-167.

Burma'.¹⁴⁷ While such a picture was offered by one adherent of Mainstream, I am sure many other Mainstreamers would have opted for a different imagery; indeed at least some of them have embodied a much more participatory and flexible model of leadership themselves. But a strategic and assertive approach to leadership is quite evident, providing a contrast to a rather different vision of leadership offered by some other major figures considered here.

However, while other hermeneutical lenses might have been possible, this volume opts for 'two streams of thought': Stream One, focusing on denominational or structural renewal, and Stream Two, the concern of which was theological renewal. In theological terms, they represent two visions: one based on mission, and therefore a 'missionary union,' and another on covenant, and therefore the union as a covenanted ecclesial body. Or, to put it in the language of fears and concerns, one concerned with church decline and the other with disregard for a deeply theological and thinking faith. As Goodliff rightfully notes, these were not necessarily opposing streams, but they do convey a sense of tension in terms of their theology in general and ecclesiology in particular.

Life, including ecclesial life, is marked by complexity, and so categorizing the emphases in terms of 'mission' and 'covenant' can risk omitting important nuances. The limits of such categories are illustrated by the chapter on ecumenical concerns, which reports a significant overlap in the positions of the two streams. While, as Goodliff notes, for Stream One the natural interest was in developing ecumenical relationships within the evangelical landscape, there is also an account of a passionate argument for engaging with *all* Christian churches and a larger scale ecumenism. Goodliff notes a more functional approach to ecumenism on the side of Stream One compared to commitment to unity in Christ as a source of theological renewal on the side of Stream Two, but it is nevertheless a reminder of a rather intricate picture of convictions about the nature of the Church, which the 'two streams' lens does not quite explain on its own.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 36. (This is a quotation from Arthur Thompson, "An Open Letter to Dr. David Russell." *Mainstream Newsletter* 3 (1979), 3.)

Given the close proximity of this study to the present, I wonder what kind of a picture would emerge if the written sources explored in this book would be supplemented by qualitative interviews and/or oral histories. Official papers are not on the same level as statistics, but they only ever tell us partial truth. (This is evident in Goodliff's observation at one point that while a person may have been a co-author of a particular document, 'it is not clear that he owned the description of the union within [that particular document]'.¹⁴⁸) Of course, memory and hindsight would have altered the views people might have held some years ago, making the picture even more wonderfully and exasperatingly complex. In any case, this would be a really interesting continuation of the project.

What, then, of the conclusions that can be drawn for the Baptist life today, particularly on the translocal level? Here are some thoughts that I am left with. The role that the evangelical identity, so significant for what Goodliff describes as Stream One, played in the story of BUGB is obvious. (Again, it would be mirrored in the life of many other Baptist Unions.) As Goodliff helpfully notes, 'what happened in the 1980s . . . was that a growing confident evangelicalism confronted a less confident sense of being Baptist'.¹⁴⁹ Yet the significant narrowing down of the terms 'evangelical' and 'evangelicalism,' particularly in the recent years, seems to confirm Brian Haymes' old concern about party labels and the need for other ways of expressing commitment to the key role of Scripture for our faith and practice. These days, 'evangelicalism' as a category is becoming increasingly problematic for constructive use; indeed given how it has been co-opted by particular groups in the US, there is a growing number of Baptists who see it beyond redemption, and who have turned their attention to a 'post-evangelical' future.¹⁵⁰ It would be interesting to consider the role these terms play in the life of BUGB today, throughout its different associations.

I was also struck by what Goodliff identifies as the lack of a *theology* of Baptist translocal ministry, even though structures were significantly

¹⁴⁸ Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, 191, in relation to Nigel Wright.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵⁰ See, for instance, David Gushee's recent publication, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020).

overhauled and some substantial theological groundwork has been offered. Surely there is an important issue being raised in his claim that the attempt to ‘flatten’ the structures by giving much more ‘power’ to regional associations (and enlarging their territories in the process) resulted in an even greater institutionalism ‘in form and practice’.¹⁵¹

So how can Baptists do theology together, beyond the level of the local church? How do they listen to each other and through each other; how can they together seek the guidance of the Spirit? How does change take place in a denomination, and who brings it about? How do the practical concerns and theological models interact in a context of a Union seeking renewal? There are a lot of lessons here, not only for BUGB Baptists, but for Baptists and non-Baptists elsewhere. Reflecting on our current times which, in terms of the church’s life and witness are just as challenging as the last decade of the last century, I have been struck by a footnote relating an observation by Gethin Abraham-Williams, the then editor of the *Baptist Ministers’ Journal*. In it, he requests an article that would seek to address ‘the uneasy relation between theological reflection and pragmatic activism’ and suggests that ‘in a survival situation, theology appears to be a luxury we can no longer afford’.¹⁵² This volume has given us plenty of thought, and if anything, it has further convinced me that in a time like ours, we simply cannot afford the luxury of ignoring our own theology, and that of others. However, this involves paying attention to theology’s different levels: operant as well as declared; reflected in our practice and people’s personal life stories as well as preserved in documents and analysed in further pieces of work—including the one we have engaged with today.

Tony Peck, European Baptist Federation

My first word is one of appreciation for this fine study from Andy Goodliff. When I learned that his doctoral work was dealing with this period in this story of our denomination, I wondered whether it was perhaps yet too soon to achieve the necessary critical distance from it.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 191. It is at this point that I would love to hear the current evaluation and reflection on the situation by those who had argued for these structural changes in *Relating and Resourcing*, for example.

¹⁵² Ibid., 199.

But I find this a well-researched and compelling study of a crucial period in the life of our Union that allows the main actors and the documents to speak for themselves. There is a judiciously balanced conclusion with which I find myself largely in agreement.

I was unsure how to begin to respond to my reading of the book. Do I think myself back 25 years to when I along with others was at the heart of the events that Andy describes, as the Chair of the Denominational Consultation *Reference* Group? But at that point I know I must guard against becoming defensive of decisions taken then. So I have tried to read Andy's work in the here and now and to borrow his perspective as much as I can, to be open to looking more objectively about the events he describes.

For the remainder of this response I want to make one overall observation, and then to engage with that part of Andy's conclusion where he highlights three key areas of tension which were around then and which he argues are to some extent still unresolved.

Ferment

The general point is to agree with Andy when he quotes David Coffey in using the word 'ferment' to describe that period in British Baptist life during the 1980s and 1990s. Andy usefully highlights many of the reasons for this. Looking back on it, it seems to me that one of the greatest causes of ferment was the impact and influence of the charismatic movement (and to a lesser extent house church restorationism) on all aspects of our life together, though one that I think that alarmed those in leadership in various parts of the Union who then tried to hold out against it as long as possible.

Whatever we may think of it, charismatic renewal produced a whole new generation of local pastors and leaders who thought quite differently about worship, about ministry and leadership, and about Baptist institutional life, and who in some cases were even questioning the view of authority in the church under Christ being based on its members gathered to discern the mind of Christ together. So ferment there certainly was, and Andy has documented the way in which, with the arrival of new Union leadership in 1990 more sympathetic to an

evangelical charismatic outlook, change was being urged upon the Union from several directions.

Tension 1. Conceiving the Union

I think that Andy is right to identify different conceptions of the Union from his Stream One and Stream Two, respectively missiological and theological, or perhaps more accurately, missiological or ecclesial, because I don't think that it is true that theology was lacking in all missiological concepts of the Union.

But it was true that many respondents to the process of change at the time seemed content with the Union being a missional resource for the churches, and were unhappy about assigning any ecclesial significance to it. I do not share that view and indeed in my current ministry in the European Baptist Federation have found it very helpful to articulate the 'ecclesial' characteristics of the EBF, and also to use the language of covenant as the basis of our being together, rather than doctrinal unity

But what is the Union? The BUGB Constitution that was operative until recently stated at the outset that the 'Union shall consist of the Churches, Associations of Churches, Colleges, other Baptists organizations and persons who are for the time being in membership with the Union. In the latest Constitution, that statement has dropped from the top of the page, but the definition is still there under the clause on 'membership'.

Sometimes in Andy's discussion of the issue it almost appears as if the Union is something 'other' than its constituent parts. And this I also remember, that in that time of intense debate the 'Union tended to be seen as 'those working in Didcot', or involved in key committees and, it was sometimes added, wanting to 'laud it' over the local church. But the Union, or Baptists Together, is of course all its members and for me this should be characterized by maximizing their active participation in its life.

Somewhere in his book Andy mentions Nigel Wright's use of the work of Miroslav Volf's work on the church as image of the Trinity, particularly with reference to a more 'congregational' type of church.

There are some ways in which I find Volf's overall model lacking, but one aspect resonated with me, and that is the element of *participation* — that a church that truly reflects the Trinity is one with an intense level of participation of its members in its life. The 1990s was a time of intense participation in the life of the Union, not least in the Denominational Consultation itself. And in moving forward from there the concept of covenant could have underpinned this by keeping alive the vision of the different parts of the union to truly participate in shaping and determining its life together.

My observations from afar is that the level of participation in the life of the Union by its members has decreased somewhat in the past 20 years both in the Union itself and in Association life. New Government regulation about Charity Trustees and where decision-making should take place no doubt has contributed to this. But is it true, as I think John Colwell asked in a recent article, that in some ways we have moved away from our emphasis on a participative gathering to seek the mind of Christ and become more Presbyterian on our governance and structures? What is the Union today?

Tension 2. The Roles of Union and Associations

Andy helpfully charts the way in which, from the time of J. H. Shakespeare the role of the associations, many of which were much older than the Union, was rather unclear for much of the twentieth century.

And yet the earlier histories of some of the associations probably provide a richer seam of what Andy's Stream Two would describe as 'an ecclesial reality based on covenant theology' than the Union itself. This earlier reality of 'associating' was not absent from all the discussions of the 1990s and some of us hoped that the associations might rediscover that role for themselves. I'm not able to say how it has worked out since, but my sense is that it has been a rather mixed picture.

The renewal of associating was by a long way at the top of the list of concerns emanating from the Denominational Consultation. I remember some meetings with the Group that produced *Relating and Resourcing* when some radically different options were discussed. In the

end there came into being 13 Regional Associations, nearly half of which already existed. The others had the challenging task of bringing together several smaller associations, often with long and honourable histories of their own. And with the new Regional Associations came Regional Teams, appointed by the region, and an end to Union-appointed superintendents and designated Union 'Areas'.

This was controversial at the time, and remains so today. I don't think that the decisions were all based on pragmatic considerations, but I could wish that some of that covenantal thinking might have found its way in, especially to help illuminate the thorniest issue of all at the time – which was how these Regional Associations should relate to the Union of which they are part. That issue seemed to become the ground of a lot of angst and shifting of power in the life of the Union in the years that followed.

Tension 3. Theology versus Pragmatism

I'm glad that Andy states more than once that these were probably not embraced by anyone as absolutes but rather represent a continuum, with Andy identifying Stream One as being more driven by pragmatic mission concerns, and Stream Two more concerned to build the future on carefully constructed theological foundations, especially that of covenant.

The discovery by some of us in the 1980s of the missiological writings of Bosch, Newbigin, Kirk and others, articulating a theological basis for mission were possibly too recent to influence the Denominational Consultation. Though I discovered recently that I still had my copy of a substantial introduction to the theology of mission, drawing on insights from these writers and written for the Action in Mission programme of the Union in 1990 by Nigel Wright and David Slater of Mainstream. Not all mission thinking was driven by pragmatism, though much undoubtedly was.

On the 'theology' side of the tension, Andy has some important questions to ask in this part of his conclusion on the place of theologians and scholars among Baptists and what he quotes Brian Haymes describing as 'a wariness to theology' among us.

Of course there is truth in that, which I certainly recognize, but it raises for me an ongoing question of how Baptists ‘do’ theology together. Of course this should utilize the best theological minds among us, but it also needs to find a way to share this thinking much more widely around the table with those who might not see themselves as ‘theologians’ but are successfully basing their ministries on being ‘reflective practitioners’.

Why was there never a meeting together of representatives of Stream One and Stream Two in the period we are looking at? Perhaps there were more ‘bridge’ people between the two streams than we realized at the time. Because it may have been in such meeting that what Andy calls a ‘shared story and a common sense of belonging’ might have been debated and discovered, or at least some common ground identified on the way to that.

My final comment is that I remember being acutely aware at the time that, first we were not going to get everything right and we did not; and, second, that this was not the end of a process so much as the beginning of a further journey of development and reform. For me, looking in on it, that journey seems to have taken some surprising and sometimes disconcerting twists and turns. And it continues.

Over 20 years on, and to utilize a saying of Kierkegaard beloved of Ernest Payne, can Andy’s backward glance to this critical period, with its plea for a theology of covenant and a concern for mission to be in dynamic relationship with one another, help us to understand more clearly how to live the life of our Baptist community forward from here?

Andy Goodliff, Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend

Let me begin by saying thank you to Christine Joynes and the Centre for Baptist Studies, and to Keith Jones and the Baptist Historical Society, for jointly hosting this seminar and book launch. It’s a great feeling to have the book be given this attention and the encouragement to people to read it for themselves.

Let me next say thank you to Paul, Tony and Lina for giving their time to read, engage and respond to the book. This feels a little like a

second viva. Having Paul and Tony respond is both a little daunting and also exciting, since they both played a big part in the events the book describes. Lina is someone whose thought I have admired for a while and is well placed to suggest whether the book has any merit beyond English Baptists.

The book is largely the thesis I submitted for my doctorate at University in St. Andrews in 2018. My attention turned to the subject of Baptist life in the 1990s partly because I had been someone in the 2000s involved in Baptist institutional life as a member of BU Council and was part of conversations that went on after 2002, where the book ends, about the ongoing renewal, which hit a new crisis in 2012 in what was called the Futures Process. I had a hunch that much of what happened in this later process was linked very much to the decisions taken at the end of the 1990s. Another reason for looking more closely at the decade was an opportunity to engage with the theological work that I have found so interesting and helpful, in particular the work of Paul Fiddes and Nigel Wright. Tony remarked whether we are still too close to the period in question and that might be true, but it felt that enough of distance had been created to take a look.

Let me make one more comment. The story I seek to tell in the book is selective: it seeks to explore the key institutional changes. Other stories could be told, and will need to be told, one particular one might be termed ‘a summons to be heard’, reflecting on how voices, especially of women and people of colour, were working hard through the period to have a seat at the institutional table.¹⁵³

So let me turn to the responses.

I’m very grateful to my three respondents, who have been very generous in their readings of the book and ask all the kinds of questions I hope the book raises and I would want to ask as well. At the end of the book I conclude that the conversation about being Baptist is one that needs to continue and one that I believe needs to

¹⁵³ See Andy Goodliff, ‘Women and the Institution’, *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* 1 (2020) and more recently a paper presented at Dimensions of Baptist Identity Conference, IBTS, April 2021, currently unpublished, which traces some of the story of Baptists, race and racial justice.

engage with history and tradition. Perhaps not every decade, (at least among Baptists), can cope with the amount of theological reflection that took place in the 1990s. Here was a flourishing of minds that wanted to think deeply about Baptist life. English Baptists have to go back to the 1960s for anything like an equivalent. If this is the beginning of a tradition, every twenty years, perhaps the 2020s will initiate a new period of engaged thoughtfulness and reflection. I share Lina's suggestion that 'we cannot afford the luxury of ignoring our theology.'

In his response Paul asks whether the two streams might reflect not just two different emphases, but two different theologies — one of covenant and one of strategic alliance. I think there is some merit in this distinction, and there is perhaps some evidence of the latter reflecting stream one, although I think this would have gone too far for some. What it does reflect is the struggle we have to find the language to describe what was then called the Baptist Union and now labelled Baptists Together and I think this comes from not being clear what we think it is to be *churches, associations and colleges* in relationship and what we want it to be and this is partly because we didn't start with a Union, but it developed, largely pragmatically and rarely with any theological understanding. Here I suggest the opportunity to grapple in the 1990s with these questions moved too quickly to allow the possibility of a shared understanding to emerge — what Leonard Champion called a 'clear, coherent and widely accepted theology.' Paul raises a second question about scripture and tradition, which I think relates to the comments Tony makes about how we as Baptists do theology together. Those offering a theology of covenant, were working with scripture and tradition, creatively, but this failed to find any real traction with a large constituency within the Union, which I think was more of a misunderstanding, rather than a straightforward rejection; although Baptists love a proof text, so we can say 'this is that'. I can only suggest we have to continue to take seriously the need for a theologically educated ministry and to engage them to take seriously in encouraging theologically educated churches. One of my current concerns is that I am not sure in the Union where intentional theological reflection is now being done, at least of the kind that we saw in the 1990s? It was not perfect, but I contend the Doctrine and Worship Committee was a precious gift that was never appreciated enough.

I'm glad Paul thinks there might have been an opportunity to work more with *Five Core Values*. This document did capture the imagination of many at its publication, and I remember that we engaged with it in the congregation I belonged to in Stevenage. Although I think there were problems with it, it was perhaps was a starting point to build on. Sadly, *Five Core Values* is already yesterday's news. The lesson, if there is one, might be that theological voices among Baptists might need to be alert to where a concept or an idea finds resonance within the Union — meaning more than Didcot — and see how it can be further explored and developed.

Tony's response makes a helpful observation about a key cause of the ferment being the charismatic movement, which shook up Baptist life and did cause some divisions, since some embraced it and others didn't, which therefore provided some of the rationale for David Coffey's Baptist Union presidential theme of Build that Bridge in 1986. My sense of Nigel Wright and David Coffey is that while they were and are those who have been shaped by the charismatic movement, they were also consciously Baptist and alert to a broader liturgical Baptist tradition, represented by others. In addition they were not uncritical of the ways the charismatic movement developed with its emphasis on revival and signs and wonders. Tony is right in that there was, I think, a sea-change in the broad make-up of ministers and churches from the late 1980s onwards that were committed to a Spring Harvest style evangelical charismatic Christianity, which overwhelmed a very different kind of Baptist identity from a previous generation. Steve Holmes is helpful here in what he has to say about maximal and minimal accounts of Baptist life. There is perhaps the evidence to suggest that the minimal account, Baptists as evangelicals of a believing baptism type, has come increasingly to dominate.¹⁵⁴ This also picks up Lina's question around the place of evangelicalism among Baptists today. There has been, I think, a fracturing and some disillusionment within evangelicalism and this has affected Baptists.

Tony comments that the level of the participation in the life of the Union has decreased in the past twenty years. I would share that view, and some of my questions are how much that was a result of the

¹⁵⁴ See Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 7.

changes at the end of the 1990s, how much is that related to Charity Law, and how much of that is an ongoing loss of denominational identity? Difficult to answer is how much churches felt involved or interested in the deliberation of the 1990s, and how much have they ever felt involved or interested in the whole history of the Union. The danger is perhaps a nostalgia about membership of the Union or engagement with Associational life that was always patchy and largely the concern of the those who sat on the different Councils, etc. I was entirely ignorant of Baptist life beyond the local church until I was invited to be a part of the Union's Younger Leaders Forum in 2003. It might be observed, like perhaps a large number of local church diaconates, that the make-up of Council did not really change, once you were on, you were on for a long-time and arguably it was an in-club for the selected few. Here the argument of the report *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council* by the Doctrine and Worship Committee, that a strong deliberative Assembly is an important counterpoint to the Council.

Let me say I recognize Lina's comment about what kind of story or picture might emerge if the argument of the book had relied more on the use of oral history. In my defence, while some people re-write a PhD for publication and take many years, I wanted to get the thing published as soon as possible. It is offered for those to respond to whether I have been fair or accurate in the story I tell. I'm sure there are things perhaps not fully understood and mistakes made. Tony pointed out to me that through the book I gave the wrong name to one group! What I hope is that there might be an engagement with the book from those who lived through the period, like Tony and Paul today. And that the engagement would not just be a historical one, but one that asks precisely the kind of questions my respondents have raised. Our history, and decisions made in the past, do not define us for ever, but understanding them and engaging with them is vital to the activity of making sense of who we are today and who Christ might be summoning us to be tomorrow.

Journal of Baptist Theology in Context

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We welcome submissions from Baptists pastor–theologians.

All submissions to be emailed to Andy Goodliff (andy@goodliff.com) as word documents with footnotes. Submissions to be no more than 7,000 words.

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.