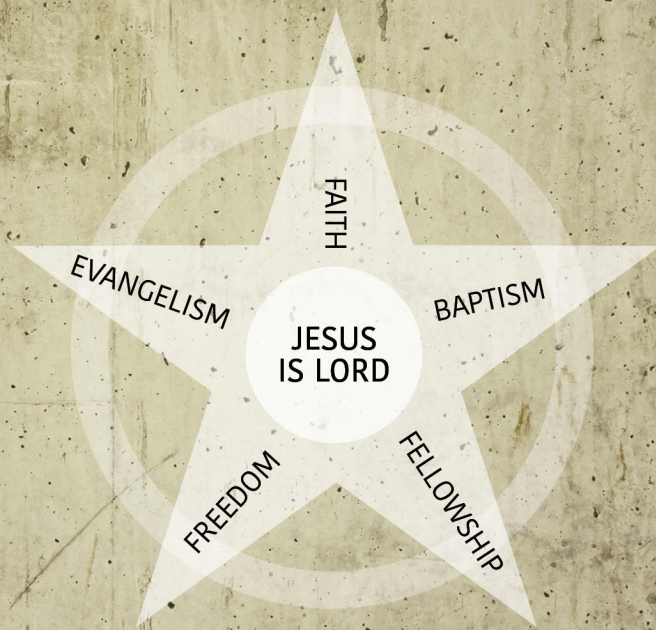


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# A Question of Identity

**Brian Haymes**

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A form of this essay first appeared as a booklet under the title *A Question of Identity: Reflections on Baptist Principles and Practice*. Given as a series of lectures to Baptist Ministers it was first published at the Ministers' request by the Yorkshire Baptist Association in 1986. It is a document of its time, although I have had a steady stream of requests for a copy. What follows is the basic text but with some changes of style and historical references.

## 1. Baptist Identity: The Importance of the Question

I propose to set forth and defend a thesis. It is in three parts: (1) that there are important features of Christian identity to which Baptists have born witness as a way of being Christ's church; (2) that these features are worth developing and guarding because it is for more than our own good that Baptists be true to their inheritance; (3) that we are presently in danger of neglecting these features and in some instances actually betraying them. Just what some of these particular features are I shall come to later and develop more directly.

In many ways I am both surprised and disappointed that my mind has turned to this task. I am surprised because from the very start of my ministry I have known ecumenical commitment and fellowship. My first pastoral charge, in St George, Bristol, was part of the Redfield United Front, an area of local ecumenical experiment before such things were invented. In my two other pastorates I was grateful for the friendship and fellowship of those other traditions that encouraged me to believe that the quest for the unity Christ wills is a primary sign of an obedient church on the road to genuine renewal. At the time of writing (1986), I was the principal of the only UK Baptist college wholly committed to an ecumenical way of life.

So I find it surprising that I seem to be advancing such a limited thesis. May I make it clear, I hope beyond all doubt, that this is not for me an exercise in denominationalism. Most 'isms' are forms of idolatry and stand condemned when they lay claim to a loyalty that belongs to Christ alone. To shout for Baptist identity, for the denomination's sake as such, would be, in my understanding, an act of betrayal against the Christ who is leading the church into new streams of life that we can only enter together.

I would, however, say this. It is my personal experience and observation of others that serious ecumenical involvement does strengthen denominational awareness. My suspicion is that you will find the most convinced Baptists as Baptists in the various forms the ecumenical movement takes. Few Baptists have been so committed to the cause of Christian unity as have Dr E.A. Payne and Dr David Russell, but few Baptists have been so committed to Baptist principles as have they. Those who stand outside local and national councils may believe that they are most loyal to our tradition and understand it better, but I am not so sure. Encounter with people of other denominations makes the participant think again and again about just what it is that they are asserting. To remain convinced under these circumstances is born of an understanding and appreciation those outside the discussion do not know.

So I do find it personally surprising that this is my theme, and disappointing also. The disappointment is there because of what I see and hear of some Baptist church life today. Again, may I make it clear that I have no desire to defend a Baptist tradition just because it has been the tradition. That kind of fundamentalism is as dishonouring to God as is any other kind of fundamentalism. I am not arguing for the ways of yesterday in our Baptist churches because I have some personal dislike or disapproval of what is common among us now. It is more important than all that. It is the conviction that aspects of our Baptist identity, ways of being the church in keeping with our gospel convictions, are being disregarded or abused. In the last analysis my thesis is about the nature of the gospel.

I have met members from too many churches who tell me of procedures, activities and beliefs which, in my judgement, compromise and betray the gospel. It is as disappointing and serious as that. I have

had to listen in sorrow to too many members and ministers indeed, some of long standing, who are no longer part of Baptist life because as they sometimes put it ‘this is no longer the denomination I joined’.

Now, in one sense, of course it isn’t. Everything changes and develops and that is a sign of life. Only the dead do not change, and I hope I have made it clear that I am not trying to mount some defence of yesterday’s details as against their modern counterparts, the kind of hymn-verses-choruses controversy once much loved of correspondents to *The Baptist Times*. That sort of dispute may be important but in its detail it is not my concern here. Neither is it the typical concern of those who have spoken to me about their leaving of the denomination for other churches. It is more fundamental. It is about those aspects of Baptist life that together led us into our Baptist identity in affirmation to what we believed about Christ. As I say, it is fundamentally about the gospel, about God’s ways with us that I am compelled to write.

Thus far, I have used the personal pronoun in both singular and plural forms. Perhaps I claim too much when I use the plural and talk of the beliefs and practices ‘we’ Baptists share. I am no historian, and though you may judge it rightly to be a shocking thing for a college principal to say, I confess that I am no great shakes as a Baptist historian. Others with better information and perspective must correct my judgment and assertions. There is an old joke about the person who speaks for the Baptists having yet to be born and the parents are dead. So, this is a personal statement; it is very much ‘as I see it’ and others will perceive things differently. I hope they will tell me what they see.

I believe we are losing a sense of denominational identity and that that is serious. Perhaps such ‘identity’ never was very strong, or if it was there, it was for those sociological and atheological reasons that undoubtedly have a large part in bringing any denomination into being. Perhaps. But I note this, that some Baptist risked personal opprobrium, sacrifices and death for what they held dear as Baptist in their gospel witness. To them, at least, such things mattered. They transcended social concerns alone. Less dramatically I have noticed this. When I first was in pastoral charge, members leaving the district would ask me for the addresses of Baptist churches in the area to which they were going. There was a kind of loyalty and self-

understanding which meant that membership would eventually be transferred to another Baptist church because it was Baptist. Nowadays that does not happen to anything like the same extent. It is much more likely that people will shop around and other criteria than denominational are employed as people look for a 'lively' church.

This is certainly the case in the student world. Denominational societies in the universities have virtually disappeared. Few ministers commend students to the local chaplains, being more likely to pray and encourage their young members to follow a theological line from all parts of the theological spectrum, or party expression, rather than the matter of denominational identity.

Which brings me back to both surprise and disappointment because it seems to me that there are both positive and negative reasons for this kind of change that has taken place.

Positively there has been the rise of ecumenical consciousness. Baptists, like some others, have not always had a good name when it came to church unity discussions and participation in schemes of reunion. We tended to stand on the edge, for a number of reasons. But the truth is that many a local Baptist congregation has established ecumenical links. Through the influence of the ecumenical agencies and through, we pray, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we have found a wider family that is ours in Christ.

Many of us are thankful that we have lived and ministered at such a time when we were led into larger places, open areas where the wind blew stronger and more clearly than in those confined hollows where storms can so easily rage and the dust clog our lungs and eyes. It is not that we have sought to be less than Baptists but more. It has meant a loss of identity only in the sense that children lose their childhood and grow to fuller structure in a larger world. This ecumenical development, through official and unofficial channels, has weakened in one sense our denominational identity by making us aware of the divine judgement on all our denominations. In all other ways, it has been liberating, strength giving, positively disturbing and creating - as we might expect of the Spirit's work. Here I recognise a positive challenge to my thesis.

But there are other, less appealing reasons why denominational identity and loyalty has been changed. I shall mention three. First, there is the polarity experienced in all the British churches around such matters as theological perceptions, the liturgical movement, the theology of mission and charismatic renewal. These 'divisions' and others cut across the denominational boundaries and create their own loyalties. Members moving to a new town would look for an evangelical church, or charismatic gathering, or some other criteria of distinctiveness that was important to them. But just note at this point, please, what this says about what is understood in practice to be the ground of Christian belonging and fellowship. It is an issue to which I shall return.

Second, there is the rise of what I call 'non-rational conservatism'. By this frail phrase I mean an attitude to Christian truth and life that places great store by 'feeling right' especially in togetherness. 'Let's just share together' is a key catchword. On the face of it, it seeks to overcome Christian divisions in a surge of Christian spiritual unity but in reality it is the gathering of the 'right feeling', a particular illustration of my first point. Such an attitude to the Christian life can reveal an impatience with demanding questions of belief and practice. These are dismissed as 'theology'. Whereas 'real Christians' just get on with praising God.

Such 'non rational conservatism' is easy prey to the rising contemporary dogmatic neo-biblicism. A chaplain to university students who is also the minister of a large central town church said to me in some disappointment, 'the students have told me that they don't want to think when they come to church'. It is an attitude not restricted to students. In one sense the churches are only reflecting the spirit of the age with its desire for authoritative leaders with clear cut answers, preferably set to songs that demand little in every sense. Feeling right is all, and we solve life's difficult questions by dissolving them.

You will have gathered, rightly, that I have little taste for this kind of religion, believing as I do that it represents a compromise with the gospel. I do have a serious regard for that conservative evangelicalism that took questions of doctrine, truth, belief and order seriously in the conviction that these things are not just 'theology' but they matter in

the whole question of the church living in the light of the gospel. But ‘non-rational conservatism’ produces rot and there is a lot of it around. It is not traditional conservative evangelicalism that influences our churches now. That tradition did not despise the mind. There may be good vibes to be had from a certain kind of groupiness in religion but it can all become a trap, shielding us, perhaps intentionally, from the great intellectual and moral issues before the church and the world. Denominationalism at this level may be lost but it is not all gain. I hold no brief for that sterile intellectualism that can deaden the Spirit however ‘correct’ its words. But we are bidden to love God with all our heart and mind.

The third unappealing reason for a loss of denominational identity has been the rise of personality cults within the church. This is not unrelated to the modern longing for the authoritative leader and the charismatic personality. Have you noticed how, in the religious press, it is the names of the speakers that are in bold type when advertising a conference, often more prominent than the conference subject itself? It is around personalities that loyalties grow, loyalties that may in the end be little more than fashion.

Basing Christian fellowship on anything other than Christ ill becomes a Baptist understanding of the church. In a situation like ours, where theological polarities, what I have called ‘non-rational conservatism’, and the cult of the personable leader becomes over-important, the need for a resurgence of Baptist identity will not go amiss.

My argument is that there is such a thing as Baptist identity and that it is important for the good of the whole church that it be preserved. I do not think that such identity consists in particular doctrines in themselves, such as believer’s baptism or the gathered church, but in their unity, a way of being Christ’s church in the world.

I have chosen four particular features of that identity for the next four sections. I could have chosen others but these seem to me to have contemporary significance. They are the nature of the true church, the question of authority, the tradition of dissent and the importance of right belief.

Let me repeat myself, to make my point quite clear. I am not concerned with denominationalism. Such an 'ism' is no better than the party spirit so properly condemned by St Paul when he found it at Corinth. It flies in the face of the spirit of the high priestly prayer of John 17. Neither am I concerned with a kind of morphological fundamentalism, a kind of up-market 'well, we've always done it that way'. Being true to our history as Baptists would seem to me to be more a matter of responding to present circumstances than actually standing by an ancient order. Everything we say, build and do is historically conditioned and, therefore, is not to be absolutised in a fundamentalism of tradition. That would seem to me to be a form of idolatry and I want no part of it.

I expect and hope for Baptists to change, eventually to lose and find their freedom in the coming great church. I pray and long for that day. But realistically I recognise that for the present the denominations will continue, only slowly changing. It seems to me, therefore, at such a time as this that we all remain loyal to what we still experience as genuine insights, for the sake of the church of Christ, and I would add, ultimately for the world.

## **2. The True Church**

The early Baptists shared with other Christians of their day a sense of necessity when it came to explaining themselves to the world and to other Christians in particular. This they did by producing confessions. I shall have something to say about this in the final section.

But for the moment, let us concentrate on an interesting feature of these various confessions. Generally speaking it is apparent that Baptists held, in keeping with others, the chief doctrines of the Faith. When they came to confess their faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, when they touched upon the doctrines of salvation, creation and the last things, there is little that is exceptional when compared with other churches, at least those persuaded by the Calvinism of the day.

The point where differences emerge, vigorously sometimes, is over the doctrine of the church. It is on this issue that Baptists marked out their confessions with clarity and persistence. They were particularly concerned with the calling into being by God of the true church.



Just read and note this long quotation from the influential Second London Confession 1677.

1. The Catholic or Universal Church, which (with respect to internal work of the Spirit, and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the Elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

2. All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the Gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ, according unto it; not destroying their own profession by any Errors everting the foundation, or unholyness of conversation, are and may be called visible Saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.

3. All purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture, and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but Synagogues of Satan; nevertheless Christ always hath had, and ever shall have a Kingdom in this world, to the end thereof, of such as believe in him, and make profession of his Name.

4. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, in whom by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order, or Government of the Church is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner, neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that AntiChrist, that Man of Sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.

5. In the execution of this power wherewith he is so instructed, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the World unto himself, through the Ministry of his word, by his Spirit, those that are given unto him by his Father; that they may walk before him in all the ways of obedience, which he prescribeth to them in his Word. Those thus called he commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or Churches, for their

mutual edification; and the due performance of that public worship, which he requireth of them in the World.

6. The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves, to the Lord and to one another by the will of God, in professed subjection to the Ordinances of the Gospel.

Where will you find the purest church under heaven? Once the confession has allowed for the fact that in this matter perfection is not on the agenda, the answer is in that congregation called out by Jesus Christ the Lord, gathered in but from the world, who walk the way of obedience, who live and worship by the Word together. This is the concept of the gathered church, those who have been born from above, converted, made alive in Christ by the power of the Spirit. This is the regenerate church that lives by grace through faith.

In other words, there was no claiming that you were a member of Christ's church just because you happened to be born into a so-called Christian country. Simply because your parents or grandparents were Christians and had put you through some religious rite as a child, this did not make you a member of Christ's church. The true church was the church of God's choosing, God's calling in Christ of those who, gifted with the Spirit's work of faith, need put their trust in Christ the Lord. Here was a strong stress on the divine initiative, the work of the gracious God.

Since the true church was thought of in these terms, and the confessions supported their argument by massive appeal to scripture, and since, as all acknowledge, baptism is the sign of entry into the church, then baptism is for believers only. It is for those who, to quote again from the confession, 'do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience, to our Lord Jesus Christ, (these) are the only proper subjects of this ordinance'.

Now, why should I bother to go over this familiar ground again? Should you be a Baptist, I shall be very surprised if, at least in general

terms, you do not agree with me thus far. My reasons for the reminder is because I believe that in this understanding of being the church there are encompassed some very important matters, not just about Baptist identity but about the meaning of grace and the significance of the church. I hope you will not be too dismayed if I say I am going on to make nine inter-related points.

1. This perspective on Christian identity recognises the importance of the church in the purposes of God. The church does not come into being as some optional additional extra to God's great work of the salvation of the world. Rather it is fully part of that purpose and that, above all, is its glory.

It is all too easy, the church becoming what it can sadly become as an everyday reality, to lose this sense of the church's significance. I can understand the world making fun of the church and counting its life of naught. I can understand those in the church who weep and laugh over its foibles, ridiculousness and abiding sins. But what I cannot understand are those Christians for whom the thought of being the church is of no consequence, who have a low view of its calling in every respect. I do not myself subscribe to the view that argues that the church is an extension of the incarnation but I do believe the concept of the body of Christ has to be taken with seriousness as that flesh and blood reality of the presence of Christ in the world. I affirm the importance of the church in the purposes of God. Any notion of salvation that overlooks this is just too small, not least in terms of the biblical witness.

2. So I argue, Baptists have stressed the gathered nature of the church. But the point to underscore here is that the gathering is the act of God. The church does not come into being because a few like-minded religious people get together to do their own thing and establish their own club. Church is called into being by God. Its presence in the world is a work of his grace.

In 1985 the Baptist Union published a slim collection of essays entitled *Bound to Love*. At their heart was an argument about the meaning of the church and to this the authors gladly resorted to the biblical and

historic concept of covenant.<sup>1</sup> Many of our churches in earlier days saw themselves as covenanted communities and, in true biblical fashion, thus emphasised the divine initiative. It is God who makes covenant. It is God who calls the church into being.

We suffer in our generation the old temptation of human centred religion. It shows itself in several ways but one of the consequences of it is that we think of the church as being 'ours', based on human initiative, the success or failure of which is demonstrable in human terms. The price paid in taking this view is the loss of the great sense of God's calling, the coming into being of the church, and the sustaining in being of the church by the gracious action of God. The chief builder of the true church is the Lord. By grace we are saved, by grace we are made to be numbered among God's people. Let me stress the concept of the gathered church, gathered by the gracious God, lest we lose the realisation that the church is born out of the gospel rather than the gospel being sent forth from our church.

3. You will have sensed in all this that I want us to recover the old evangelical doctrine of grace. That God is gracious and calls us to the life in Christ, to be his people in the service of his Kingdom, that is of the gospel founded on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the very grace of God.

Now 'grace' is not something that God possesses as we might own a car or have red hair. Grace is of the very nature of God so that it is better to say that God is gracious. This is God's nature and activity. Speaking in this way means that we are saved from thinking of grace as some substance, some extra, that God might instil into us, almost on the model of the doctor's injection of some protective serum. God is gracious and it is by God's precious activity that we are saved and called to be God's church.

It is easy, so it seems, to speak of God's grace in impersonal terms - just as it is too easy, so it seems, to present the gospel in terms such that it is our believing that saves us and if we do not believe we are

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the authors of *Bound to Love* went on to reflect on covenant, in *Something To Declare* (Whitley, 1996); *On the Way of Trust* (Whitley, 1997) and *Baptists and the Communion of Saints* (Baylor, 2014).

damned. The first error separates God and God's grace; the second encourages this human centred approach to the Christian life.

A realisation of the dynamic personal category of grace, that God is gracious, helps us see the true significance of the notion of relationship with God. The gracious God is not forced upon us upon us, blinding us with mighty wonders and the overwhelming works of power. We are saved by grace, by that gracious graceful waiting Father who by the power of divine vulnerable love evokes our trust in him. Thus are we saved by grace, there is nothing for any of us to boast about. Our salvation is the work of God from first to last and even what we call 'our faith' is but God's gracious gift unto salvation.

4. That God is gracious is the very heart of the gospel. It is the faith the true church lives by and proclaims. The graciousness of God, who is Christlike and in whom is no un-Christlikeness at all, that is the ground and motivation of our evangelism. We do not evangelise in order that the church of itself might grow, for that is bordering on the temptation to human-centred religion that may have its worldly success but does not lead to life.

Because God seeks to save all; because in God's gracious purposes the church is called into being; and because of this, the true church sets forth the personal challenge of the Kingdom in the name of God. Here is the importance of evangelism, the sharing of the good news that God is gracious. If you know that you will share the love that you are given. If you don't know it no number of appeals to be committed will make the essential difference. The true church is evangelical not as a theological party label (another of those 'isms') but in the proper sense of living in, by and with the call of the gracious God.

5. I have already argued that the doctrine of believer's baptism arose out of this doctrine of the church. I believe that here we have an important gospel insight.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I have reflected further on baptism in 'Baptism as a Political Act' in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World Through the Baptism of Believers* edited by Paul S. Fiddes (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1996), 69-84; 'Baptism: A Question of Belief or Age?', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27.1 (2000): 121-26;

I reject absolutely that charge from some that believer's baptism stresses more the human response while infant baptism stressed the grace of God. For reasons I have already given, I judge that any notion of grace that suggests some impersonal action without relationship is to speak of something other than the grace of the Christlike God. It is true that in some Baptist churches baptism is set forth as only some individual personal act of witness to faith in Christ but this is selling the Baptist understanding sadly short. Believer's baptism is an affirmation of the saving grace of God. As such I think we Baptists ought to be much bolder in affirming the sacramental nature of the action. Here God has provided a fruitful meeting point between God and God's church. I say 'God's church' because it simply is our experience that more than the individual candidate is involved in baptism. We are all drawn into this activity of the gracious God. Our coming to baptism affirms the divine initiative and in the very act of baptism God remains the chief actor. Isn't that your experience of simply being at a baptismal service?

Would I then be in favour of closed membership churches? My answer is 'in spiritual practice, Yes, in law no'. On the basis of Paul's argument in Galatians I would not make any religious rite in itself the basis of Christian fellowship. That is the road that leads to legalism. But I would be very reluctant to receive into membership anyone who would be unwilling to be baptised. I cannot think of what would count as a possible reason for such a rejection of this step following the Lord. Baptism, like the eucharist, is the Lord's gift to his church. I hope we shall never underplay its significance. I fear we are in danger of so doing.

6. Part of the significance of baptism, in keeping with my argument that the church is called in the purposes of God and that we are gathered by God to be God's church in trusting response to God's gracious call, is the notion that in baptism we are incorporated into

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'The Moral Miracle of Faith' in *Dimensions of Baptism. Biblical and Theological Studies* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Stanley Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 325-32; and 'Making Too Little and Too Much of Baptism' in *Ecumenism and History: Studies in Honour of John H. Y. Briggs* edited by Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 175-89.

Christ. This in itself is a rich and fruitful theme and I cannot attempt to draw it out now, save for this comment.

The relationship between baptism and church membership is too important to be overlooked. Again I argue that those Baptists who stress the individual nature of baptism alone offer an unbalanced interpretation. There are no private deals with Jesus. To be baptised into Christ is to be baptised into his body. By baptism we become members of Christ's church and for Baptists that always takes form as the local fellowship of believers. Those Baptists who are prepared to baptise people without the privileges and responsibilities of church membership being straightforwardly implied do not seem to me to have grasped the full significance of baptism, of the Church, or of the fellowship of Christ. When this happens we are in serious risk of loss of identity, not just as Baptists, but as Christians.

7. By extension of the last point, it seems to me important that for all our recognition of the significance of the local congregation of the fellowship of believers, we also recognise that being in Christ draws those geographically separated congregations into fellowship in Christ.

No Christian congregation lives to itself, in Christ. No Christian congregation does its own thing, in Christ. It is this incorporation, this 'being the body of Christ' that is the theological ground of our associating together and our shared life as a Union of churches. Such interdependency was more obviously a feature of our early Baptist life than it is today. The 19th century saw the emergence of the independent Baptist church, a downgrading of a more traditional and theologically significant perception of the nature of the church and common life in the body of Christ.

It is a disturbing feature of our present Baptist ways that association life is marginal to most congregations. I am dismayed when local congregations, or more often simply their ministers, take that phrase in the Declaration of Principle about each church having liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer Christ's laws, as justification for them to do what they will without any reference to others in the fellowship of Christ. I am not pleading for some centralised control but simply for the recognition that we are given to one another, that we need one another, to encourage, rebuke,

question, confirm, enhance our common life. We need a renewal of trust, a larger sense of Christ and the church. We need to be reminded that it is only with all the saints that we know the love beyond knowledge. The true church is the church in active fellowship and association with others in Christ.

8. Let me go back for a moment to my point about the church being part, an important part, of the purposes of God in Christ. I do so to draw out this point about the true church we are sometimes in danger of distorting.

Since the church is called in the purposes of God, it cannot be in itself the full sum of God's purpose. The church serves God's purpose. True enough, those who by grace know the fellowship of Christ rejoice in their salvation and their hope, but God's goal is nothing more nor less than the Kingdom. Do you recall that perspective in 1 Corinthians 15 as the apostle speaks about the work of the risen Christ, delivering the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 'When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him, who put all things under him that God may be everything to everyone'. (1 Corinthians 15:28).

The church does not equal the Kingdom. It bears witness to its experience of God's salvation and calling and to God's own hope, God's dream of a mended creation. Thus the true church participates in the mission of God. It is the church for the sake of God which means for the sake of the world. I shall illustrate what this has meant for some Baptists in a later section. The seeming indifference to the claims and needs of a dying world that is all too easily expressed in some forms of church life would not have been recognised by some of our Baptist forefathers as authentic Baptist existence at all.

9. The understanding of the church I have tried to set forth here can be described as having a sharp clear centre with blurred edges. The sharp clear centre is God in Christ, God in Trinity. God calls the church to be the church. God gathers us in fellowship, feeds and nourishes us, and calls us to share God's mission. The central focal



point of the church is clear. The ground of our belonging is the living Christ of God.<sup>3</sup>

But the edges are blurred. As older generations said, *only the Lord knows his own*. Therefore it is not for the people of God in the world, with all their frail and sinful humanity and limited vision, to fix the limits of God's gracious saving presence.

The centre focal point of the church is Christ and he is always more than our ideas of God. That is also why the true ground of fellowship is something more than doctrinal agreement, or common experience, or preferences in worship, or understanding of mission. The centre is Christ whom we are called to follow. Christ is more than our knowledge and experience of him. See again how we need one another if we are to grow into the fullness of Christ. But see also how we must be rather more open and trusting of one another than we sometimes are.

If we are saved, if we are members of the true church, then it is by grace, by grace alone. And if Christ accepts us as we are, sinners and failures, then might not that quality of Christlike acceptance of one another be something for which we might earnestly pray, as token of our longing to be the church, not ours, but God's, to the glory of God.

At their best Baptists have perceived these things with an openness to ways yet to be made known. There is a Baptist identity here worth preserving.

### **3. Questions of Authority**

Questions of authority have always been and will always be on the church's agenda. People have asked for authoritative statement of doctrine and ethics, what is believed and what should we do? Thus in I Corinthians we have an early exercise in pastoral theology. Some difficult questions of faith and freedom were being raised. Just how authoritative is an apostle, and is Paul a real apostle anyway? What

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<sup>3</sup> For a further exploration of these points, see chapters 1 and 2 in Brian Haymes, Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne, *On Being the Church* (Paternoster, 2008).

should be done about immorality or false belief in the church, and who should make the decisions anyway? On the discussion on marriage in chapter seven Paul is careful to draw a distinction between his own words, which are not without authority, and the words of the Lord which carry more weight. But even if a 'word of the Lord' can settle some issues in Corinth there are many more problems, and among them some of the most pressing threats to our common life today, not covered directly by that source.

We know the problem of defining and recognising true authority. It is popularly said that we live at a time when there is a crisis of authority - not just in church affairs, but in our general moral and political life. The respect for authority has gone, so we are told. And to fill the vacuum there has come with a rush a horde of authoritarian leaders, in state and church. Such figures always have their day when crises of authority emerge. It seems we cannot bear the agony of uncertainty for long.

I think we do live at a time when understandings of authority are changing, when certainly some traditional centres of authority are being ignored or severely tested. But I doubt whether we are really very different in this respect than any other age. Perhaps better world communications heightens the tensions and makes some controversies more visible.

But, in fact, as we all know, the questions of authority have come much nearer home. The issue is raised in many a discussion between ministers and comes alive, directly or indirectly, in church meetings. As a denomination the Baptists have not had a central council with authority. We have had no Pope, although some have come near to it in the imagination of their hearts! We have recognised the autonomy of each local congregation, none being able to dictate to another. So the government of the church has found its expression through the church meeting. And this at times has led to frustration of major proportions. I have heard disturbing stories of local church meetings where the faithful few have thought and prayed an issue through with their minister only to have their hard-won and costly proposal rejected at a specially called meeting by those claiming 'rights' to be present but whose attitude and response has been far from right. Hearts get broken and tempers are lost, and so is the spirit of Christ.

Such experiences are not unknown, God forgive us, and it is perhaps no surprise that new patterns of authority and leadership emerge. The less-than-perceptive, foot dragging, spiritually unresponsive church meeting is laid to rest and the others, those of insight, faith and true love for the Lord lead the church. At last something can be done, at last we can really go forward!

Now let me say that I have sympathy with ministers, deacons and church members who turn their minds in this direction. Trying to lead a local church with a polity like ours is at times a frustrating, heart breaking business. And when old Joe kicks up a stink and wins the emotional support of the meeting because he has been so loyal for so long rather than for what he says...you can't help but wonder and start looking elsewhere. And this is increased as we are told, allegedly, that the growing churches are those with clear authoritative leadership - and you do want your church to grow.

But I believe there are profoundly evil temptations near us when we think like this and not a few fellowships of believers have been utterly destroyed by an erroneous theology of authority and leadership. I think by reasons perhaps of our frustrations, perhaps because of our aping the spirit of the age, we are rejecting important evangelical insights to which our heritage bears testimony. On the issue of authority there is something to be said for Baptist identity, a way of being the church in the world. If we lose these insights we may be able to get things done as we judge best but we shall have lost a pearl of great price. We will have lost something of what it is to live in the Kingdom. Let me explain.

It seems to me that traditionally Baptists have wanted to say three things about authority. First, all true and ultimate authority is Christ's. He is Lord and none shall qualify or share his Lordship. He is not simply the head of the church, he is Lord and all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him.

Second, the Bible is authoritative, significantly more so than preacher, pastor or pope. It has also been understood that personal or corporate claims to receive divine illumination by the Holy Spirit have to be brought to the test, not the least, of scripture.

Third, when it comes to the shape, direction and ordering the life of the local company of believers then, as the Declaration of Principle has it, 'each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer his (Christ's) Laws'. No local company of believers has rights and authority over any other fellowship. That is to put the point negatively. The more important positive features are those we shall come to later.

Now, I do not believe we can simply repeat these affirmations without facing the pressing questions of authority which arise within and outside the church today. Part of our being true to Baptist insights will be in seeing how these three affirmations can be held creatively together. I am also conscious of the need to recall what I wrote earlier about no one being able to speak for the Baptists, On this matter of authority I doubt whether I shall be able to carry everyone with me. But I do think that I am acting in a true Baptist spirit when I ask you to 'hear' what I have to say and then, of your kindness, affirm my perceptions of gospel truth and, with gentleness, correct my errors. We owe it to one another, in this and other matters, to speak the truth in love. What I shall do for the remainder of this section is to reflect on these three affirmations about authority and see how they might relate coherently together.

First then, the authority of Christ. This I take to be an absolute statement in that in all human affairs it is the Christian conviction that Christ is sovereign Lord. I shall want to dwell on this and its implications much more in the next section but here I want to make two particular points.

The first is to underscore the affirmation of the absoluteness of the authority of Jesus Christ. He alone is Lord. This is part of the meaning of the raising up of Jesus in the power and purposes of the living God. It means that all human words, institutions, claims to authority and status are relativised. To attempt to affirm an absolute authority other than or alongside and greater than Christ is to fall into idolatry. It is the worship and service of another pretending to be a god. It is the offering of worship to one less than the only one worthy of worship and human devotion. The Christ of God is Lord and the Lord is the Christ of God. As I say, the social and political ramifications of this will be the theme of the next section. For the moment the point is that

when it comes to life in the world or in the church, nothing, absolutely nothing, can be put into the balance alongside Jesus Christ, the sovereign Lord.

However, my second point is this. I have said above that no human words can be set forth in challenge to, or be equated with, the divine Word, Jesus Christ. I believe this to be true, not the least about our own words about Jesus. It is one thing to say that Christ is absolute Lord. It is quite another to say that our picture, our words about Christ, represent absolutely the one who is Lord. To insist upon the absolute truth of your christology is, I believe, to make an idol because whoever Christ the Lord is he is more than our words and images of him. If you know anything of the history of the church and its mission you will know that some terrible un-Christlike things have been said and done in the name of someone's 'Christ' who is less than the full Christ. The living Christ relativises our human construction of his person. If we do not recognise this then we are saying that our ideals, concepts, words about him are the Lord, not the living Christ who remains until eternity God's gift beyond words. We make our theology our 'god'.

Does this mean we cannot speak about Christ? Of course not. It just means we have to recognise our humanity. We have to recognise in ourselves as well as in others the need for a proper humility that listens as well as speaks, that is convinced but will not idolise its convictions, not even about Christ. I am not simply speaking about the need to express our conviction quietly and in love. It is the further point that is more significant. It is that none of us know the whole Christ, none of us perceives the fullness of the truth of the One who above is Lord. You may be 'sound' in your theology but if you absolutise your doctrines then it is these that you make your Lord and in so doing, however correct you may be, you offer us less than Christ as Christ. He is Lord, not our words about him. He is Lord, not our picture of him.

So I affirm the absolute authority of Christ. What about the authority of the Bible? Here too I wish to affirm its unique authority but I cannot pretend that I mean the same by that phrase as would the early Baptists. The essential difference between us lies in that they lived

before the advent of critical historical consciousness in the reading of the Bible and I do not.

It is sometimes said in our churches that the Bible is the Word of God. For all its truth, I believe that can become a seriously misleading statement and in one important theological respect is simply untrue. This relates to the point I have made above. Jesus Christ is the Word of God. He is the Word that was in the beginning; he abides as the Word of salvation and judgement; he is last and final Word that will ring through the cosmos at the conclusion of our history and the purposes of God.

The Bible bears the all-important witness to him but it is not itself the Word. There have been doctrines of the Bible that have tried to put this divine stamp upon its text, arguing for an absoluteness of its authority and an infallibility in its teaching but, peculiarly, those have only been upheld in the minds of their advocates by very unbiblical reasons. Let me try and make my own position clear.

The Bible seems to me to be authoritative because it is the basic resource for those who believe that Jesus Christ is the living Word of the liberating God. God saves in Jesus but the nearest we can get to that historic figure are the books of the New Testament that bear witness to him by the Spirit. That witness, however much it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, is through men and women. They tell their story of Jesus and, thank God, they do not all tell it the same way. They tell it, with the possibilities and limitations of their cultural context and thus it is through their word that we are drawn near to the living Word.

If you wish to deny or challenge this I beg you to think first of the doctrine of God to which you will appeal. If you deny the humanity of the biblical writers, if you say that God simply used them to produce an infallible, ahistorical, account of his word, then I do not see how you can claim to be speaking of the God to whom the Bible bears witness.

In the extreme form, of course, those who persist with this argument are guilty of idolatry, or rather bibliolatry, the worship of human written texts rather than the living God who may well be the inspiring agent of that text but is not to be identified absolutely with it.

You can try to make too much out of a good thing and thereby end up with something less. My complaint with fundamentalists and today's atheological non-rational conservatives is not that they take the Bible seriously but that they do not take it seriously enough.

Let me give a quite specific illustration. It is sadly a well-known fact that women ministers or ministers-to-be have a hard task settling in some pastorates, although the situation is improving and we are together receiving the blessings of all whom God calls to ministry. Now, let me lay on one side all those arguments, charges and counter-charges about social conditioning, cultural limitations and rank prejudice. Let us take the issue as a strictly theological one. Those who support the 'no women in the ministry' argument theologically do so with an appeal to scripture, for example, that St Paul seems to deny to women the right to leadership and teaching within the congregation. Again whether or not their exegesis of these passages is correct is not my concern. What I am concerned about is the fact that in words I heard from F. F. Bruce during a visit to the Northern Baptist College. He was asked about women in ministry but directly replied by asserting 'anyone who takes the word of the apostle Paul and turns them into a law for the church has simply misunderstood the apostle'. That the letters of the apostle of Christian liberty could be taken as a God-imposed unalterable pattern for the Christian church's life seems to me to represent a failure of faith in the Pauline sense of trust. Remember the careful distinction Paul draws between a word of the Lord, from the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:10) and what he writes and recognises is his own judgement (1 Corinthians 7:25). Those who want to make the Bible that objective absolute infallible authoritative word of God are unwilling to walk by faith desiring rather an indubitable sign. Bibliolatry is unbiblical and worse. It is idolatry and hence denies to God's beloved the glorious liberty of the children of God.

The Bible is authoritative. It is for me the major resource for the meaning and living of the life in Christ unto salvation. It is inspired but that is not to deny its humanity and limitation. No everything in the Bible is Christian by any means, so to put it another way, the Bible was made for humankind and not humankind for the Bible.

Actually, of course, what happens is that a theory about the Bible becomes the authority, not the Bible itself in its all-important

testimony to the living saving Word of God. It is a truth recognised within the scripture itself that the letter kills, it is the Spirit that gives life. I would wish that the Bible were taken much more seriously in our churches than at present but perhaps before that can happen we have to be set free from some very unbiblical ideas about the book.

Now what about the church? Again I want to begin whatever I have to say on this by affirming my central conviction that all authority belongs to Christ. He is the head of the body and the Lord contains the mind. No person, Pope or pastor, no council, Assembly, conference or Church meeting has any authority except where it reflects and expresses the mind of Christ, in which case, of course, the authority is Christ's. This is where our church meetings can go so tragically wrong. Ours is not a democratic form of church government. Democracy is rule by the people. The trouble is we have too much rule by the people, by the likes of us. Our calling is not to win votes but to seek and do the mind of Christ.

But then, as you will have seen coming, I personally cannot simply equate the mind of Christ with the unanimous decision of the church meeting. We can be wrong, unanimously. In no way can I deify our church decisions. So three things in particular follow from this.

One is, I wish we could learn a certain kind of Christian trust and true humility about our decisions. We Christians of all people ought to be ready to admit the possibility of error. We have an infallible guide in the Holy Spirit, to guide us into all truth, thank God. But none of us has an infallible apprehension of God's guidance. We have overstepped our limits when we refuse to listen to others. The church must pray, listen, think, decide and act, and all that in faith and trust of God. We shall sometimes be wrong and we must pray God's mercy - but there is no way by which we can bypass that fallibility.

Second, I hold that there is none the less a Baptist wisdom in the tradition that says it is the whole church listening, praying, deciding together that determines that congregation's life under Christ. It is with all the saints that we know the love of God. This is not to say that one vote, or one voice, is as significant as another in the church. Those recognised as leaders must be listened to. But for all our sakes as the people of God we need all who will to listen, pray, decide and act with



us. I know of some churches where minister and deacons, or the elders now make these decisions. That is unwise, and if that situation has come about because the church meeting was not functioning properly and has become a democratic mess then the answer is not to abandon the fellowship of all believers but to seek its reformation.

Third, I come back to the point I made earlier about our churches being in association together. Now, I do not want in any way to compromise the autonomy of the local congregation but I find a wisdom in an earlier tradition whereby a local congregation before enacting a significant decision sought not the permission but the spiritual judgement of others. I repeat, this is not to put one congregation under the authority of another but it is a denial of the right of any local congregation to do its own thing regardless, even if it believes it follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Why are we so fearful that we do not ask others to judge with us our plans? The important issues of strategy, church planting and creative evangelistic endeavour are weakened because we do not act in the spirit of those who were called into being under God to be the Baptist Union. I see the local church meeting, properly understood, as having real authority. I see a wisdom in our mutual joint exploration of the Spirit's guidance. I pray that we may learn how to have divided opinions within a common loyalty to Jesus, who is also Lord and Saviour, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth belongs.

In conclusion, let me add two particular comments on the authority of the minister and then a quotation. First, it seems to me in the light of Jesus that all human notions of status and authority are overturned by the Lord. With him authority is not about status, power of personality or the pulling of rank but has everything to do with service. Any minister who feels her or his authority has been questioned and is put out about it should read John 13 and Mark 10:34-35.

Second, authority is Christ's and if we have any personal authority then it comes as God's gift. It is for the church to recognise it, not for us to insist upon it. Indeed, since authority in a Christian sense can only be given, any minister who insists upon her or his authority by reason of their calling only demonstrates that they do not have authority according to Christ.

Finally, a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It comes from *Life Together*, that beautiful book on Christian ministry and fellowship. You may feel the argument is overstated but I pray we shall not miss the point.

Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, learning and proclaiming is carried out. Every cult of personality that emphasises the distinguished qualities, virtues and talents of another person, even though these be of an altogether spiritual nature, is worldly and has no place in the Christian community. The desire we so often hear expressed today for ‘episcopal figures’, ‘priestly men’, ‘authoritative personalities’, springs frequently enough from a spiritually sick need for the admiration of men, for the establishment of visible human authority, because the genuine authority appears to be so unimpressive. There is nothing that so sharply contradicts such a desire as the New Testament itself in its description of a Bishop (1 Timothy 3:1f). One finds there nothing whatsoever with respect to worldly charm and the brilliant attributes of a spiritual personality. The bishop is the simple, faithful man, sound in faith and life who rightly discharges his duties to the church. His authority lies in the exercise of his ministry. In the man himself there is nothing to admire.<sup>4</sup>

That is a word not just for ministers, but deacons, elders and members, in fact for us all.

#### **4. The Tradition of Dissent**

Baptists are, historically, part of the fruit of that strong tree called the Reformation. We gladly take upon our lips the evangelical doctrines of justification by grace through faith alone. We are protestants, and not a little proud of it.

There is one phrase, quoted often enough by some of our forebears, but not so often heard today which I hope we could revive. It is the phrase, ‘the Crown Rights of the Redeemer’. It is a much more vivid

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (SCM, 2015 [1954]), 84-85.

and alive way of describing what I was trying to stress in my last chapter, that is, the affirmation of the absolute authority of Jesus Christ.

The Crown Rights of the Redeemer. The phrase has colossal implications, not just within the life of the church, or of the ‘religious’ world, but in social, moral and political matters. The ramifications of saying Jesus Christ is Lord are endless. Strangely enough the opponents of Christianity have sometimes been quicker to recognise this than have many believers. To say ‘Jesus is Lord’ is to utter what can amount to dangerous doctrine.

It was out of loyalty to the absolute authority of Christ that the tradition of dissent began which led to the name ‘Dissenters’ being applied to our forefathers. They dissented from all suggestions that the state should decide the form of the church’s belief and worship. They dissented from all government attempts at uniformity. But the nature of dissent was more far reaching than the religious world. As I say, the implications of actually living out and under the Crown Rights of the Redeemer are very considerable indeed. Let me illustrate something of what I mean by reference to the lives of three Baptists who in different ways expressed a manner of being Christ’s church in the world which is part of that Baptist identity I pray will not be forsaken and lost.

In the city of Nottingham, as in many cities, you will find plaques on walls commemorating notable Christian leaders. There you will find reference to William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. In an underpass, you will find a plaque commemorating a great sermon preached by William Carey, the first of the BMS Missionaries. My guess is that most Baptists will know these two names and a little of their history. But, what about Thomas Helwys? In Broxtowe, a suburb of Nottingham, in a little Anglican church you will find a stone tablet recalling Thomas Helwys the Baptist and the first to make a plea for religious liberty in England.

Thomas Helwys was a man of great religious seriousness with a deep love for the Bible. Originally a Puritan, he became by conviction a Separatist and found it necessary, like others, to flee to Holland. There he and his friends, with John Smyth, moved with the scripture from Separatism to a view of the church that implied believer’s baptism.

Thus the first church of English Baptists came into being in Holland. Helwys and some others became convinced that they must return to England, though they were aware of the risk. So in 1612, in Spitalfields, they formed the first Baptist church on English soil. But it was not long before Helwys was imprisoned and, as far as we know, died a prisoner.

One of the reasons why the authorities could not ignore Helwys, and why he is so important, is regarding the thoughts that he expressed in his writings, especially *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. There is nothing short about it, being some 200 pages long.<sup>5</sup> It is a book full of apocalyptic references that read strangely to us. But the authorities were correct to see its dangerous character, at least in their terms.

It is, in fact, a bold plea for religious liberty, not of the tolerant human rights type argument of today but based upon that perception of life before the Crown Rights of the Redeemer. Let me offer you two quotations. The first, the better known, comes from the heart of the text and encapsulates Helwys' argument:

Our Lord the king is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a king but in earthly causes, and if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord and king can require no more; for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answer for it, neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least manner.

Now, given the temper and thought of the time that amounted virtually to treason. But the second quotation in many ways is even more direct. It is the inscription by Helwys in the copy of the book dedicated to James I. Here it is:

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<sup>5</sup> For my further reflections on this text see 'On Religious Liberty: re-reading A Short Declaration of Iniquity in London in 2005', *Baptist Quarterly* 42.3 (July 2007) and 'Thomas Helwys' The mystery of iniquity: is it still relevant in the twenty-first century?' in *Exploring Baptist Origins* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas Wood (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010), 61-76.

Hear, O King, and despise not the counsel of the poor, and let their complaints come before thee. The King is a moral man and not God; therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual Lords over them. If the King have authority to make spiritual Lords and laws, then he is an immortal God, and not a mortal man. O King, be not seduced by deceivers to sin against God whom thou oughtest to obey, nor against thy poor subjects who ought and will obey thee in all things with the body, life and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth. God save the King. Spittalfield near London. Thomas Helwys.

Remember the historical context, the turmoil of the times. Henry VIII had broken with Rome for good and bad reasons and the issue of authority in church and state was shot through the so-called *Elizabethan settlement*. Later in the 17th century there is the death of Charles I, the days of Oliver Cromwell and the struggle in English life of monumental proportions. And at the heart of it a hardly known man, one of the earliest Baptists, whose understanding of the life in Christ led him to costly sacrifice in challenging the powers of the day in the name of the Crown Rights of the Redeemer. For Helwys, like the prophets, there was a clear understanding of who was the Lord, and whose authority was ultimately to be obeyed. Kings and bishops must be put in their place, with the laws they enact. It is not that such are to be disregarded. Indeed they should be obeyed on all earthly matters where their sovereignty extends. But when Caesar asks for what belongs to God he shall not have it. The Crown Rights of the Redeemer are not to be compromised lest we be led back into slavery again.

The second Baptist I wish us to recall lived in the 19th century. A Kettering man, he went to Jamaica in the service of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1824 when he was 21 years old. These were the days of struggle against the evils of trading in slaves. To us, this work was a great iniquity and we wonder at people being so blind for so long to it, and even, God forgive us, speaking *for* the trade *as* Christians. (It may be that our grandchildren will wonder at our present blindness to the great iniquity of world hunger. We must pray that it be so).

It was a struggle to overcome the slave trade. The vested interests were strong and powerful. Some argued that so radical a change would bring to chaos the economic order - always a powerful argument when it comes to support for the *status quo*. But the battle was joined and missionaries were inevitably drawn into it. William Knibb knew personally the resentment of the white owners towards any missionaries who might support abolition. There were laws, such as the Consolidated Slaves Law of 1810, re-enacted in 1826, that forbade the gathering of slave congregations. Other laws were designed for the dual purpose of preventing assembly and curtailing the activities of missionaries who would work among the slaves and the poor. The authorities feared revolt, so the lid must be kept on the tin.

In December 1831 there was a slave riot, led by a black Baptist deacon Sam Sharpe, the responsibility for which was placed on the Baptists.<sup>6</sup> The planters were increasingly angry as the British Parliament took more and more seriously the argument for abolition. Some of our BMS missionaries, Knibb among them, were arrested and maltreated, even to the point of being threatened with death, while Sharpe himself was tried and killed.

Once again the Baptists found they had to champion the cause of religious freedom for there were groups formed in Jamaica who sought to expel sectarian missionaries and allow only the teaching of the established churches. Methodists, Moravians and Baptists all suffered. The Baptist missionaries came to a bold, inevitable but costly conclusion, that 'slavery must cease or the mission to the slaves be abolished'.

Knibb was sent back to England to speak for the Jamaican Baptists, slave and free. It is said that he did not get the warmest support from the BMS committee because some were ready to counsel a prudent cautious policy. Knibb is said to have responded by declaring that he was ready to take his wife and family by the hand and walk barefoot

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<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to those who helped us understand more of the importance of Sam Sharpe and other Baptists in their fight for emancipation. See for example, Delroy A. Reid-Salmon, *Burning for Freedom: A Theology of the Black Atlantic Struggle for Liberation* (Ian Randle, 2012) and the articles in *American Baptist Quarterly* 34.1 (Spring 2015).

through the kingdom rather than keep silence. His boldness in telling the story of the appalling treatment of Jamaican Baptist slaves won the general support of the committee.

But, some days after, at the annual meeting of the Society, speaker after speaker came with no reference to slavery, until Knibb rose to speak and that with great passion. Not all the supporters of the Society were prepared that the slavery question should be made a major issue and it is said that the secretary, John Dyer, pulled Knibb's coat-tails as the case was powerfully put. Said Knibb, 'Whatever the consequences, I will speak; I will not rest day or night until I see slavery destroyed root and branch'. Knibb was tireless in the cause, giving evidence before parliamentary committees for six days.

The Abolition Bill was introduced and passed in 1833. It meant the payment of huge sums of money to the owners and the Act also required that there be a five-year apprenticeship system to prepare slaves for freedom. Just as important for Knibb, there was the affirmation of religious freedom.

Knibb was back in Jamaica for the first full day of freedom, 1 August 1838. A coffin had been made and into it were thrown the whips and shackles, all the symbols of this human tragedy. At the stroke of midnight Knibb cried 'The monster is dying; the monster is dead! Let us bury him. The negro is free'. It was a moment whereby, after the answering of a call and the struggle of righteousness with evil, the Crown Rights of the Redeemer were affirmed in which are to be found the liberation of the people.

My third Baptist in illustration of my theme will come as no surprise. He is the most significant Baptist of this century, Martin Luther King. His story is well known and needs no long recounting. It is the story of a struggle in the spirit and the name of Jesus Christ the Lord.

The struggle was against the demon racism. In those days, in the free world, people could be segregated, relegated and abused because of the colour of their skin. King could, presumably, have settled for a useful life as the pastor of a black congregation in the southern States. But the cry of the people in their oppression was not to be denied and God raised up a prophet. He spoke of awe inspiring biblical dreams.

He uttered frightening words of the judgement of the living God the like of which we could hardly bear. His was not a sectional interest but straightforwardly human. He himself was no saint for he could be seized by many passions but at root there was the prophet's longing for social righteousness which others wrote off as being less than the real gospel but which King knew belonged to the Kingdom of God.

So in the name of Christ he called out the evil and named it. He strove with it with the weapons of the Kingdom, with love, trust, forgiveness, hope and mercy. Let justice and peace embrace. The prophet shared the divine vision. They got him in the end. On 4 April 1968 he was shot. He was 39 years old. His was the evangelical faith that we are justified by grace. He lived like the Lord with a vision of God's justice flowing like a stream, clean living water to give life to the earth. He was killed and is alive, a testimony to the resurrection faith. He never lost faith in the ultimate redemption of humankind he had glimpsed in Jesus.

These three Baptists, Helwys, Knibb and Luther King are part of our heritage. They express the tradition of dissent. Yet that is too negative a word. For they did not just dissent from evil but they actively threw themselves into the cause of God, the God who would transform the world. Theirs was God's struggle for social righteousness. They lived out, in the world as much as the church, the Crown Rights of the Redeemer. Let me underline four features of all this.

First, here is no private religion. The calling into the company of God's people was public in the sense that it meant membership with others in the church *and* a vocation to be part of God's kingdom life in the world. I sense that something has gone wrong in some of the ways we think and sing about salvation. We proclaim personal salvation and I rejoice in that. But where it goes wrong is when we equate 'personal' with 'individual' and imagine the divine salvation concerning not God loving the world so much as God loving individuals, and presumably only some at that. The concept of the individual is an abstraction. We are persons, and only persons in relationship. Our life in Christ personally produces effect and responses towards others or it is not really personal at all. Hence you cannot say you love God and hate your sister or brother, or be indifferent to your neighbour.



Second, here is a conviction that the world and not just the church, the chosen few, is the object of God's love. A form of religion that separates people from the remainder of humankind, that can contemplate its own salvation and righteousness while the world goes to hell, is not the Christian religion. The church is set in the world to serve the purposes of God for the world. Otherwise the church lives only for itself - but is not that of the very nature of our Christian calling?

Third, it is in the world that our discipleship has to be worked out, not just within the religious sphere. I am surely not alone when I grow greatly disturbed about the church I know when I read the great prophetic denunciations of easy, amoral, non-social, religion condemned by the eighth century prophets. 'Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:23-34.) The three Baptists I have recalled knew the truth of that and lived it.

Fourth, then, all this raises the question of what we mean today when we speak of Christian commitment. That can so easily be cast in such relatively comfortable terms. What of our commitment to the prophetic dream, to social righteousness, to a new and just social order? What about our commitment to world hunger, to a new social order where the human values of the gospel are more determinative of our common life than our concern for the rate of inflation? We do have a calling to change the world in the light of Christ's call to the kingdom. I think we have to think again about the meaning of commitment to Christ.

I believe that such commitment to Christ will always lead the church into social, political and economic dissent. I suppose you can have religion without politics but you cannot have the Christian religion without political ramifications. I do not know about you, but basically here I have to pray for courage above all, to recognise and live out my gospel convictions in a world that is dying for lack of dissent. Given our human sinfulness, all forms of human life will need reformation, renewal and redemption. Our political loyalties are not least in need of redemption. It was a feature of Baptist identity that we recognised that the Crown Rights of the Redeemer had social, political, moral and

economic consequences. I wish we saw that today before we sink into spiritualised apostasy and utter irrelevance.

## **5. The Importance of Right Belief**

In section 2 I quoted, at some length, from one of the early Baptist confessions. It was but one of many since the writing, discussing and revising of these confessions was a significant feature of denominational life. I can think of good reasons why we should and why we should not follow our forefathers in this expression of Baptist living.

Why should anyone do this sort of thing? I can think of several reasons. Drawing up a statement, a confession of faith, should help us be clear about just what the faith is that we hold. (Remember that early Baptist confessions often made reference to the great ecumenical creeds!) Such a statement would serve a good educational purpose. It would serve as part of an explanation to others about who the Baptists are and why they feel the need to be in some way separate. The confessions, of course, also affirmed the Baptists were part of the Christian church holding the faith of the one church. Confessions say something about the content of Christian faith, showing that it has a content and that it is not something else. Confessions explain where the church is at that moment, they are not given as timeless truths and certainly, in Baptist thinking they are not set to rival the place of scripture.

All these, and doubtless other reasons, suggest that setting ourselves the task of confessing our faith today would be a creative and useful task. So what might draw us back from so doing? First, the way in which such statements of faith can be misunderstood and misused - to beat out those who cannot agree, to exclude rather than explain. There is the temptation to take the statement too seriously, giving it a status for which it was never intended. It can draw the church into a debate about words which is not the same as engaging in Christ's mission. It can be a very 'in-house' activity consuming intellectual and spiritual energies out of all proportion to its importance.

And, of course, given the sinful human nature with which we all operate, it can be so divisive. I suspect one of the reasons why we

could not engage in this kind of activity as Baptists now, however many positive reasons there might be for doing so, is fear. We fear disagreement. We fear theological dispute. We fear the rocking of the boat. Perhaps, already, we fear one another.

I want to think a little about this in my final section because I think the whole issue is very important. I believe there were strengths about Baptist life in days when such work was done; the absence, perhaps the impossibility, of them today speaks of a weakness too important to ignore.

Christian faith is a matter of belief but belief in a double and inseparable sense of believing ‘in’ and believing ‘that’. Even more, I think that Christian faith is a matter of discipleship, of practice. However, I suspect that the emphasis in recent years in our churches has fallen on the activity of believing, believing ‘in’. The feeling, the *experience* of faith, this has come to have an unbalanced significance. I cite as evidence the way in which the quality of our worship is assessed by many according to its experiential power, its emotion and feeling, rather than its content. I am not saying this is bad, only that it is unbalanced.

For the other side of the coin is believing ‘that’. Our concern is not just with the act of believing but properly with the content of belief. There are things we believe as Christians, and it is not the act of believing that makes us distinctive, but it is the things that we believe about God, Christ, the world, the church and ourselves that make us Christian believers and not something else. The content of what we believe is important.

Let me give what I suspect will be an admittedly contentious illustration of the way in which believing as an activity and experience has become more important to us than the content of faith. No-one can doubt but that, given the spirit and the rhythm of the age, the modern Christian songs are much more enjoyable to sing than some of the old stuff. But if you actually compare the content, the *religious* content of what is sung now against some of the great affirmations of the faith in the older hymns you will see the difference. Perhaps we had too much concentration on ‘believing that’. We are in danger of too little now. It is serious because most people gain content of their

faith through what they sing. I hope that the reader will understand that this is not in itself a plea for 'old' hymns but for *good* hymns, that is, those with genuine religious content that affirm the faith and deepen it within us.

And it is a danger, because of the relationship between what we believe and what we do, between the content of our faith and the kind of church and people we become. This is true individually but also corporately, even denominationally! The recognition of the importance of this relationship cannot, in my judgement be over-stressed. In the annual lecture to the Baptist Historical Society in 1979 entitled *Evangelical Calvinism and the structures of Baptist Church Life*<sup>7</sup> Dr Leonard Champion showed how much Baptist life in the 18th century had grown dull, lifeless and moribund largely due to the arid hyper-Calvinism that had come to dominate our churches. Theologically orthodox and sound these churches might have been but they were also formal, cold, introverted and dying. Yet you will recall that it was the end of the century that saw the flowering of much Baptist life, a significant sign of which was the coming into being of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792.

How did this change come about? How did the churches come alive both abroad and at home to the great missionary calling? Well, there probably are many reasons, some of them straightforwardly cultural, but one that is undoubtedly significant is that to which Dr Champion draws careful attention. During the 18th century there were some Baptists who began to think hard again about what they believed, about the content of their faith. William Carey and Andrew Fuller were among those who began to think out and preach a new theology, more faithful so they believed to the given gospel. Theirs was a radical theology in the sense that it pressed back to the root of the matter. They met resistance, as always, but it was the new evangelical Calvinism that was part of the reason for the denomination's new life and effectiveness after those sterile years. Believing that, believing in and what you actually do are related. We neglect one part to our error and loss. (What theology dominates our denomination today - and is it really life-giving?)

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<sup>7</sup> Published in the *Baptist Quarterly* 28 (1980): 196-208.

Dr Champion's lecture contained within it the recognition that this constant thinking about the faith, this reflection on its content, on what is preached and believed, is necessary for the denomination. He said 'I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new structures of church life as an effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present. The formulation and propagation of such a theology is an urgent task'. I believe he is right.

I recognise that 'theology' has not got a sparkling image among us, and by 'us' I mean members of our churches. It may be that the dull image is deserved because what has been passed off among us as theology has been so distant and unrelated to life that we wonder why one should bother with it at all. Yet theology is 'talk of God' and the Bible is full of it. I do not see how the Christian church can be the church without 'talk of God'.

By the theological task I mean, above all, working out the faith by which we live. Just as the knowing of God in the Bible is a matter of what we think, experience and *do*, so theology is essentially a practical discipline - it is about the faith by which we live. For this reason, our 'theology' can never amount to settled unchanging propositions that are simply to be learned and repeated. The whole business of living in faith and knowledge of God is much more dynamic than that.

You will understand that there is something of a temptation for me now to launch out into a whole section on theology and ministerial training and practice. I will resist that for the point I am making now is direct enough. I notice that, in the history of the church, the times of genuine renewal, when the world was changed as well as the church, were times of theological interest and vitality. People were thinking and acting creatively as they explored the ways of God with them, ways known and to be made known. I fear at present two things in our churches. One is the atheological stance of many, the attitude that says that such questions do not matter, so let's just get on with praising God and stop thinking about God. There is a lack of genuine theological critique of matters of worship and ministry, for example, that owes more to the spirit of pragmatism than the life of the people

of God led by the Holy Spirit should allow. The other fear I have again relates to the spirit of the age that encourages authoritative definite simplistic affirmations because it is the way to get things done. Such a response is noticeable in politics and other public areas of life, but it is also observable that in practice the simplistic affirmations will not do because life is not so simple as the theory assumes. So I am anxious about congregations fed on what may in one sense be true dogmatic assertions but are not encouraged to make the faith their own. When you build your life on the assertions of another you may build on sand. We may see a flowering of enthusiasm as the next leader emerges with clear cut answers but such a ministry, unless it encourages that taking thought of God in the realities of life and faith, is not really rooting and grounding that congregation in the faith. Jesus' parable of the sower bears careful reflection here.

But why cannot we have that serious open discussion about the faith such as went on among earlier Baptists when they produced their confessions? You will have gathered that, for all that I see genuine difficulties in this practice, I also hold that such taking thought of and for the faith is a sign of strength. I wish we could take the task, the practice of theology, more seriously among us. I suggested that one reason why it does not happen is fear, fear of division and fraction; fear too, perhaps, in the minds of some that they have inward doubts anyway about their theological formulations but they cannot confess them. I have had students and ministers come and talk with me about their faith and their question of faith. When I have asked them about what others have said when they have discussed this with their peers they have said they have not been able to do this, for fear of what others might say and think. That is how they experience what we call fellowship.

I do not think it likely that our Baptist forebears were any better at coping with all this than we are. Certainly they could be as schismatic as any, separating into doctrinal groups. But what about ourselves? Why can we not talk about the faith together without falling out, even to the point of that studied indifference and mistrust we sometimes pick up in each others' company?

To some extent the answer is that we respond in this way because what we believe is so important to us. The matters of the faith are

matters of our life and salvation, so that many of us feel an attack upon our theology is an attack upon us personally. But my question is why does this have to be delivered and experienced as an attack?

To my mind, one of the reasons why we cannot, without fear, actually discuss the content of the faith together is because of our temptation to deify our beliefs. It has been a recurring emphasis of mine that we simply must not identify our words and experience of Christ with the full true reality of Christ. If only we could accept this we could manifest that open-mindedness which is a sign of trusting faith. Closed-mindedness always betokens idolatry.

There is a phrase Cromwell used in Parliament that I often say to myself, as I recognise my own temperature rising as theological debates get hotter. Cromwell said to those who were so absolutely sure of their assertion, 'I beseech thee, in the bowels of Christ, consider that thou mightest be mistaken'.

When we have nothing else to learn we are no longer disciples. Right belief is too important just to be left to our slogans without qualification. Perhaps if we were more trusting and open, we should be less fearful, and able to explore and grow in the faith together. A lively interest in theology, in articulating and discovering the faith by which we live, was a feature of earlier Baptist life. It was a task for all the Lord's people. I wish we could take such more seriously today - for thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, thy soul, thy strength and with all thy mind. 'Right belief' is too important to be left out of our adventure of answering the call of Christ our Saviour. It has been a creative feature of Baptist identity. Please God it will become so again.

### **Notes on Contributor**

Brian Haymes was Principal of Northern Baptist College (1986-94) and Bristol Baptist College (1994-2000), as well as being a minister of four Baptist churches.

## Questions of Identity, Once Again

**Brian Haymes**

It is now 35 years since the delivery and publication of the original *A Question of Identity*. These years have seen significant changes for the Baptist Union of Great Britain. I wish I could say that the trends that alarmed me then have been arrested and that our sense of identity is renewed and strong, that our shared awareness of being the Baptist Union has grown and that we are boldly bearing our ecumenical witness with other Christians and our gospel witness to the world. Unfortunately, I do not think that can in all honesty be said.

However, through these years I have grown in my awareness that I am and always have been a debtor. It was among people called *Baptist* that I was nurtured and came to faith in the triune God, came to rejoice in Jesus the Saviour, received baptism, was invited to the Lord's table, found myself called to ministry and was ordained. I have always been in membership of Baptist churches where I have found some of the finest Christian people I have known. I am a debtor to God in these faithful Christlike folk. It is why I still care about these issues and pray daily with the apostle for the church of Christ, especially in its Baptist form.

What has happened, as I see it now in 2021, is that we have redefined our Baptist identity rather than lost it completely. We have changed our name, dropping or downgrading the word and experience of 'Union' in favour of a kind of alliance or collection of networks under the title 'Baptists Together', although, alarmingly, what holds us together is far from clear. We have made huge structural changes which have resulted in diminishing the national sense in favour of localised regionalism. I am a long way from being convinced that this has led to a renewal of our belonging together in Christ and effectiveness in mission. Some congregations are even more disregarding of their Baptist partners than they were in association days. The old covenant-based associations have gone and with them a serious weakening of that corporate life wherein we rejoiced in blessing the one tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. Some numerically smaller congregation talk to me of feeling abandoned. Have we not become little fellowships of independent evangelical



churches, driven by ministry redefined too much by notions of leadership and increasingly anxious about numbers?

We have made structural changes, talking incessantly about mission, but lacking any shared theology, as if the renewal of the church in the purposes of God for the world could ever come this way! This lack of good theology shaping life is a serious weakness which may be now embedded in our structures, formal and informal. Dr Leonard Champion argued in 1979, 'I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new structures of church life as an effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present. The formulation and propagation of such a theology is an urgent task'.<sup>1</sup> I believe he has been proved right. Enthusiastic high-octane self-determined-to-succeed leadership is no substitute for deep theological engagement with the ways and will of God.

This poverty of our assumed theology has led to us becoming careless of our approach to God, our life before God. In our search for contemporary informality born of our desire for numbers to increase, we have often confused worship and evangelism. A consequence of this has been the diminishment of the place of scripture in worship services, a failure to engage with the issues of the world in which we are called to be disciples of Jesus in sermons and prayers, and an excess of singing, often repetitive in the easy listening style of today. Our acts of worship often lack today a coherent understanding of what we are doing, just who it is we are called to worship. The casual jokey approach taken by some leaders can easily suggest that all this does not matter all that much anyway. In contrast, scripture says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).

Some of our Baptist teachers draw attention to an interesting change that came over us in our history. I can only describe it here in sweeping terms. Early Baptists, drawing on Puritan roots which themselves drew on earlier forms of contemplative spirituality, stressed

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', *Baptist Quarterly* 28 (1980), 208.

the believer's and the congregation's growth *in Christ*. They longed for holiness, the working out of the implications of their common calling in baptism, growing into the life of God in trinity. They used metaphors of the journey, being pilgrims, to underline the fact that they all needed further growth in holiness, in Christ. The nurture of the disciples within the local church became a significant pastoral task, *growth in Christ*. It was not just about getting to heaven!

Then came a shift, a narrowing of the life in Christ to one crucial decision – are you saved? Huge endeavours were mounted to preach the gospel, to get decisions. The numbers were counted – the organisations became more efficient and secular business models became prominent in church. Once you have made the decision and were baptised, then what was needed from you was witness, to bring others, to grow the church. But that is not the same as growing in Christ, in holiness and love. That takes a congregation, teaching, patience, times in fellowship and service, led by the Spirit, becoming Christians in church and the world. We became, as one evangelist admitted, better at making Christians than keeping them. We got the decisions but did not give the pastoral care and teaching. We overlooked the importance of membership in the body of Christ, that local community, in and with which we were gathered by God, taught and led by the Spirit, growing in Christ.

One further unsought but serious effect of all this atheological restructuring has been the diminishment of the gathered congregation's involvement in local or national life. Indeed, one senses that the gathered church, that God-gathered company of covenanted believers, sharing in God's mission, with their God-called and given pastor, is downplayed as the church of yesterday. How seriously Baptists once took the vocation of the gathered congregation, gathered by God, gifted by God with pastors and teachers. The calling to build up a local congregation in the faith and fear of God was once such a crucial honoured task in our understanding. What has led to our desire for leaders rather than pastors caring for those vital expressions of Christian life and faith, the gathered churches?

One of those radical changes occurring in contemporary society that Dr Champion asked us to note has been the nature and growth of secularism, forms of practical atheism. This challenge to declare and

live the good news *of God* is a huge matter before the churches of the western world. We have a problem about talking of God, not to be solved by sloganeering or shouting louder. Basic theology, lived in prayer and discipleship is part of our calling. Theology is sometimes taken as a joke in the world of our time. God is ignored, forgotten. We have lived and are living through intellectual paradigm shifts, changes we have not always faced with the seriousness they deserve. We assume we can express the gospel in our words – all we need are techniques in getting it across! If we do think like that I am convinced we delude ourselves and need to engage more with the mystery of God in trinity, to learn how to speak and live Christianly with our generations. Can we learn to think about God again so that before we open our mouths we open our minds? That means a more thorough attention to scripture.

One particular factor related to all this has been changes in understanding and practice of ‘ministry’ born of serious theological confusions especially about ordination. I think it is much harder to be a Baptist minister now than it was when I began but I must confess that the preparation for serious ministry is not so deep as it was years ago. We have not invested time, people and money as we should. Who cares now about good order in the church as once we did? Too many have slipped into ministry and then out of it while undoubtedly others have been remarkable in their faithful commitment to their calling while receiving nothing like the support they need and deserve. We have multiplied ideas and patterns of ministry without facing deeply the crucial questions of the calling and testing of ministry in the context of the fundamental calling of the gathered church in the mission of God. Remember Richard Baxter’s disturbing observation that ‘All the churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise and fall (not in riches or worldly grandeur) but in knowledge, zeal and ability for their work’. That the church of Christ realises that it has a ministry, that is sharing the ministry of Christ, is more important than that it has ministers. These come only as a gift of God to aid the participation of that ministry in the mission of God. Ministry is a vocation, not a career move. We do not have a list of recognised ministers to provide paid jobs but to maintain, for the sake of the church’s calling which is for the glory of God, a trustworthy zealous, able and evangelical ministry (as the foundation documents of the oldest of our Baptist colleges put it in years before evangelical was reduced to a theological party label).

So, we have walked the way of networks and alliances rather than being the covenanted community sharing the life of God in trinity, thus living out together our baptism. Some of these new groupings have been gathered around an inspiring individual, or a particular doctrine or insight. They sometimes appear to claim a loyalty that divides, a sense of superiority over less blessed members. Denominationally we have suffered from such divisions, partisan groupings, although I think this is nothing new to Baptists. But it is always enervating of the whole. And, in spite of the fact that our losses in membership have not been so many as have other denominations (or so we have claimed), the fact is we are still in numerical decline. Our identity has changed but not in ways I recognise theologically as Baptist! How I wish it were otherwise. We have changed our styles and structures when we should have listened harder to God whom we are called to love with all our minds. Yet, I believe, still God calls us and has not given us up. Still we are called to live to the praise of Christ's glory and sometimes it shows, not least when we are sharing Christ's sufferings for the sake of others.

I cannot close this reflection on *Questions of Identity* and the concerns it raises for our contemporary context without one last comment. For me, this particular concern has always been a critical issue in being Baptist. To indicate what I mean I turn, again, to the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle, the basis of the Union. It is the first paragraph to which I draw attention. It reads,

That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.

James McClendon formally puts the point this way: 'It is Jesus Christ who is the center (sic) of Christian faith. Authority as Christians know it will be found in that center if it is found anywhere. Nor is it an absentee Christ who exercises this authority. Christological understanding begins with the present Christ – one who confronts

Christians in their spiritual *worship* and their kingdom *work*, in their common *witness* and in Scripture's holy *word*.<sup>2</sup>

Note the sequence in the Declaration about authority, born of theological reflection. First, Jesus Christ, the one to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matthew 28:18). Then, the scriptures which reveal Jesus Christ. Last, the Holy Spirit, our essential guide to help us interpret and administer Christ's laws. Jesus – Bible – Spirit, inseparable.

This stands in contrast to those groups who in their doctrinal understanding and practice affirm that the Bible comes first because they assert it is the Word of God and thereby carries sole and absolute authority in all matters of faith and practice. There are many such disciples who share this approach and their contribution to our common life has often been a blessing when they have been true to their strong biblical focus. My concern remains, however, that such an approach can become an over-emphasis, displacing the authority of Christ Jesus with the letter of the text with theological, evangelistic and pastoral consequences. Forms of fundamentalism begin to emerge and so we have idolatry. With the Bible put first, Jesus remains important but more as a matter of history and not the present living Lord who speaks through the scriptures by the Spirit into our lives and world today and whose is the voice we are to obey. The Declaration of Principles affirms the primacy of Jesus, the living Word, God manifest in the flesh, to whom the scriptures bear witness. The crucial question is always, 'What is the mind of the Lord?' What is Jesus by the Spirit saying to us today? That is the listening we must urgently engage in together. My charge is that we have not taken this listening to God seriously enough, being too eager to quote a text and settle the issue.

I offer a biblical illustration of this important distinction. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is engaged in some pastoral theology, facing issues of sex and marriage in the church. In v10, discussing marriage, he says 'To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord...'. Where Paul has a word from the Lord, that settles the matter. But in v12 he writes, 'To the rest, I say – I and not the Lord...'. In this case Paul gives his own opinion which he does not claim is a word from the

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<sup>2</sup> James Wm. McLendon, Jr, *Systematic Theology: Doctrine* (Abingdon, 1994), 463.

Lord. We have the same distinction in v25, 'Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy'. Yes, but the distinction for Paul between his word (his letters) and the Lord's word is real enough. It is a distinction I do not want to lose in our over-stating of the teaching of the Bible. After all, is everything the Bible teaches Christian and to be totally and absolutely obeyed? As I heard F. F. Bruce say, those who take the words of the apostle and turn them into a law for the church have simply misunderstood the apostle.

One reason why we have found it so hard to seriously and honestly face issues of human sexuality among ourselves relates, I believe, to this issue. It has been my experience that in discussions among Baptists on same-sex relationships someone will quickly claim 'It is wrong because it is condemned in the Bible'. Now, they may be right or wrong about that but let me say, for argument's sake, that they are right. Let us assume for the moment that the Bible does indeed condemn all homosexual acts. That would be an important affirmation. But I ask again, can everything the Bible teaches unquestionably and automatically be taken as Christian? Is unquestioning obedience to a text the way we are called to live? Is that the way Jesus lived? Isn't it more the case that we are called to discernment guided by the Spirit, loving God with our minds, in context, in the light of what else we know about life, the world and God, seeking together the mind of the Lord? If some insist on their theory of the status of the biblical text and their interpretation, then we shall not have a genuine search open to other possible understandings because one party has played what they believe is a trump card. Perhaps they could then explain why these particular texts are so decisive, so fundamental, while others are not, or at least seem open to interpretation.

Living Christian faith is not reducible to a set of propositions. Faith is not faith in the Bible – faith is not faith in the Bible's inerrancy. It is faith and trust in the living God, revealed above all in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures bear witness, which God awakens in us through the Holy Spirit and in which we grow through that love that God pours into our hearts.

We are called to be disciples of Jesus. He is Lord, the Word made flesh. To him the scriptures bear witness, crucially and uniquely, but all must be brought to the test of Jesus, God's incarnate self-disclosure which climaxes in the cross and resurrection. You can, as we must painfully admit because our history shows it to be true, find texts in the Bible to support slavery, racism, the subservience of women and other forms of wickedness. The church has sometimes lived like that and justified the position by calling it biblical. But is it Christian? Is it what Jesus taught and showed and calls us to live now? I wish Baptists had remained more faithful to this latter approach, stressing the primacy of Jesus the Lord. Following Jesus, sharing in the mission of God, asks more of us than obeying the letter written. Seeking the mind of Christ, and the courage to live it, that is something else, something we must do together. The search concerns faith and trust in God the Spirit, our guide and comforter, whose task it is to lead us into truth. Jesus is the truth. In the Holy Spirit we have an infallible guide but none of us has an infallible apprehension of God's guidance. The lust for certainty may be understandable for our frail humanity but it is not the way of Christian faith and trust in God. H. H. Farmer said that there are forms of faith too confident to be true – they are often over-familiar with God. Faith to be faith must always face the awesome mystery that is God. One genuine expression of Baptist identity would be our shared listening, all of us together really listening to one another for God, ever open to the greater light and truth God longs to break forth from out of his holy Word. Walking away, shouting down others, or coldly ignoring and dismissing those who disagree is no way forward for any of the people of God because then we are seeking to build our church on something other than Christ.

I do not know if it is going to be possible to make those changes necessary for us to be Baptist followers of Jesus together again. The new structures make that hard. The Union had a deeply theological covenant basis of trust, with implicit mutual care and a shared sense of being part of the *missio Dei*. It is hard to discern what theology holds Baptists Together together, unless it is an assumed loyalty to the relatively modern emergence of evangelicalism – at which point, of course, it would cease to be Baptist anyway. I hope we have not reached that point already.

It would help, I think, if we could take courage and formally or informally re-establish the Worship and Doctrine Committee with various sub-working groups focusing on themes such as:

- the embodiment of covenant in denominational life;
- the theology of baptism and church membership;
- being a local expression of the body of Christ;
- local, national and international interdependency in the church of Christ;
- the gospel and the changing political world;
- building Christian communities of witness (churches) in the face of incipient racism, sexism, and forms of economic injustice;
- teaching the faith among Baptists, faith thinking, towards a new catechism;
- discipleship and discipline.

It is alarmingly easy to draw up such a hardly exhaustive but urgent list. However, we are blessed with a new group of younger well-equipped able theologians who I suspect would be eager to contribute to our common life in ways not presently available to them. Just how the Baptist colleges might relate to this is not immediately clear to me. I would also urge that new groups be established to develop prayer, a new monasticism among us, reviving the Baptist Union Retreat Group's contribution to help keep us honest before God in the face of our ever present activism. The Order of Baptist Ministry is a wonderful sign of hope among us.

If the resources or the will or the vision is lacking in the present form the denomination takes to engage with this kind of necessary work, then perhaps it could be done informally, groups gathering to think, study and prepare material for us all. Dare I suggest that even the editors of this journal could act as instigators, inviting and gathering such topic-based groups for the serious renewal of Baptist life in the UK.



By proclaiming God in trinity, with Jesus, Saviour and Lord, Baptists share the evangelical faith, gospel faith. Those who assert in their statements of faith the priority of the Bible may well take the title *evangelical* but I think that over the years they have made it the label of a party within the church. The same has happened unfortunately to that honoured term charismatic. I think being a Baptist is to hold, proclaim and live the evangel of God: creator, saviour, sanctifier. That is not necessarily the same as being an evangelical and is certainly different from espousing something called evangelicalism. Please God, Baptists, held by and holding to God in trinity, revealed in Jesus, ever open to the Spirit, will in their faithfulness, their structures, their discipleship, their humility and their confidence, affirm and glory in the Crown Rights of the Redeemer and so share creatively in the mission of God. Therefore...

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3.14-20)

### **Notes on Contributor**

Brian Haymes was Principal of Northern Baptist College (1986-94) and Bristol Baptist College (1994-2000), as well as being a minister of four Baptist churches.