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Baptists and the Bible in the Last 100 Years

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In this article I want to present how some English Baptists have understood the Bible in the last hundred years. I do so as Baptists are engaged, once again, in discussing the authority and place of the Bible in doctrine and ethics. The Baptist Union of Great Britain's Declaration of Principle (agreed in 1904 and revised in 1938) mentions the Bible twice.¹ In the first article it speaks of the authority of Jesus Christ 'as revealed in the Holy Scriptures' and in the second article, on baptism, it cites 1 Cor 15.3: 'our Lord Jesus Christ who "died for our sins according to the Scriptures."' It is the first article that is the more contested, because the article continues that 'each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.' Currently there is some tension between those who want to stress the revealed nature of the Holy Scriptures and those who contend the need for interpretation of the Scriptures. The tension might be framed as between an 'evangelical'² understanding of the plain sense of Scripture³ and a more open-ended understanding of Scripture that looks to baptistic phrases like 'more light and truth to break forth from thy Word.'⁴ This article wants to see what might be heard from voices of the last hundred years (the authors of which are all writing after the emergence of biblical criticism as it developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century.)

An article of this length can only ever examine some Baptists, and the Baptists I have chosen are largely those that published work on or about the Bible. They are those who were College Principals or Tutors or held significant roles

¹ For a brief history of the Declaration of Principle see *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* edited by Richard Kidd (Oxford: Whitley, 1996). A more detailed history is currently being researched and written by Jeff Jacobson.

² The term 'evangelical' is a contested one. Pete Ward talks about 'tribes' of evangelicalism (see 'The Tribes of Evangelicalism' in *The Post-Evangelical Debate* [Triangle, 1997], 19-34) and Nigel Wright has written about an evangelical spectrum (see his comments in *New Baptists, New Agenda* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002], 13-21).

³ Brad East defines 'plain sense' as 'not a neutral or a historical meaning, but the Christian interpretative practice of reading the way the canonical words run, that is, remaining at the surface of the text and attending to the letter', *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 114.

⁴ On this phrase see Anthony R. Cross, "'Through a glass darkly": The Further Light Clause in Baptist Thought' in *Questions of Identity: Essays in Honour of Brian Haymes* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), 92-118.

within the Baptist Union of Great Britain.⁵ The first part of this article is a set of extracts that offer perspectives on the Bible and its authority. The second part of the article will seek to draw some conclusions.⁶

Part 1: Baptists writing about the Bible

A. J. D. Farrer,⁷ ‘The Place and Use of Scripture in Christian Experience’, *Baptist Quarterly* 2.2 (April 1924): 54-63.

It ought to have become apparent to us all that the particular presentation of Scripture truth for which any of us contends, is perforce an *interpretation* of Scripture. There is not, nor can there be, one central interpretation which is of divine authority, so that all the views which diverge from it more or less are more or less illegitimate. There is no uniform interpretation of the Scriptures which has been held by the genuine Christian saints of all countries and centuries. (58) . . . It would be a gain of incalculable magnitude if we could agree to recognize that the views of Scripture which we personally represent are just so many interpretations of it, and to allow the right of others to hold diverse views without denying, by word or behaviour, the genuineness of their discipleship. It ought to be a case of live and let live. I believe I can speak for those who bring critical methods to the study of Scripture when I say that they are quite prepared to respect the right of their brethren who adhere to older methods. I know at least that I am. Is it too much to ask that these on their side would acknowledge similarly that we can read the Scriptures in our way, without thereby forfeiting our discipleship, or imperiling the evangelical character of our witness; and that they would refrain from denouncing us as “traitors,” or “wolves in sheep's clothing”? I can only say this of myself—every hope I have of holiness here, or of heaven hereafter, hangs upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and His mediatorial work for me on earth and in heaven. (59)

⁵ This means unfortunately that the extracts come almost entirely from white men.

⁶ For another account of Baptists and the Bible, see James Gordon, ‘Spirituality and Scripture: The Rule of the Word’ in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality* edited by Paul S. Fiddes (Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 103-34. On the possibility of a Baptist hermeneutic see *The ‘Plainly Revealed’ Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* edited by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Mercer University Press, 2011).

⁷ A. J. D. Farrer was Tutor in Church History, Regent’s Park College, 1900-40.

Henry Wheeler Robinson,⁸ *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (London: Fontana, 1962 [1928]).

[The Bible or Church] are authoritative in the secondary sense only; they are pedagogic, leading us to God and not replacing Him. They remain and will remain the great means of grace, but they can never be grace itself. They are media through which God can reveal Himself, and they are this because they are the record of or the witness to a genuine experience of fellowship with God. (94)

The authority of Scripture finds expression through the record of a rich and varied and extensive religious experience, within which we may discern the activity of God . . . the Bible is an authoritative unity, progressive in method, but continuous in character, with the living unity of root and stem and leaf and flower. We are not dependent on the infallibility of the record . . . Our concern is with the life of the plant, the secret of the flower in the crannied wall, the mystery of God which is in it . . . The Bible is unique because no other book does bring us into this religion of the Spirit. (153-54)

H. H. Rowley,⁹ *The Relevance of the Bible* (London: James Clarke, 1941).

For the Bible is fundamentally, God's word to man, and through all its human processes of authorship and transmission there is a divine process. (16) . . . The newer attitude still recognizes the clear marks of progress in the Biblical revelation, yet it does not reduce revelation to discovery. It does not cease to be interested in the development of religion, but its centre of interest is not in man, but in God. (17) . . . The newer attitude to the Bible is therefore marked by the utmost frankness and the fullest scholarship. But it perceives that no merely intellectual understanding of the Bible, however complete, can possess all its treasures (19) . . . All the intellectual acuteness, honesty and candour, on which insistence is so often laid, are to be desired; but with them that spiritual penetration, which is given to the pure in heart, blended with them in a single approach to this incomparable Book. (20)

⁸ Henry Wheeler Robinson was Principal of Regent's Park College, 1920-42. He was appointed Reader in Biblical Criticism by the University of Oxford in 1934.

⁹ H. H. Rowley was a Baptist minister, BMS missionary, and then from 1935 Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages at University College, Bangor, moving in 1945 to Manchester University as Professor of Semitic Languages. He was President of the Baptist Union in 1957.

To me the Bible *is* the Word of God. This does not mean that in all its parts it attains a uniform level of revelation, or that we are justified in thinking that because a passage is in the Bible it gives an exact knowledge of history or science, or absolute insight into the nature and will of God. Christ alone is the Word of God that gives perfect insight into His nature and will, for in Him alone is the absolute revelation of the heart of God. (24-25). The recognition of the inspiration of the Scripture does not involve, then, the elevation of its letter to be a final and unchallengeable authority for men . . . if the Church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. xii. 27), capable of being guided into all the truth by the Spirit of truth (John xvi. 13), it, too, should be the vehicle of inspiration, and vested with an authority beside the authority of the Bible. Neither however, can be the ultimate authority for Christians. For the authority of both the Scriptures and the Church goes back to the authority of Christ. Neither Bible nor Church can take His place, though both may lead us to Him. For God is a Spirit, and through Spirit He speaks His final Word to us. (50-51)

. . . The Bible is the vehicle of truth and teaching, of summons and challenge, and unless we not only understand these things in the light of the conditions out of which they sprang, but also in light of our day and our own life and circumstances, re-interpreting in terms of our experiences the abiding principles which the Bible sets forth, it were better that we did not handle it. A merely negative Biblical criticism, that is only a polemic against the positions of yesterday, is insufficient and barren. We should rather aim to be constructive, both intellectually and spiritually, bringing to the Bible minds that are keen and active, spirits that are humble and teachable, and souls that are alive to the grace and glory of God. (122-23)

Henry Cook,¹⁰ *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1958 [1947]).

In the New Testament we have the revelation of the mind and will of Christ . . . From the New Testament we learn the essential principles of faith and practice for the Church as Christ Himself conceived them, and it is our duty as Christians to make loyalty to these essential principles our constant aim and concern (17) . . . In its pages we have the record of God's final revelation of Himself (18) . . . The Church is free, but only free within the limits of the New Testament revelation as

¹⁰ Henry Cook was Metropolitan General Superintendent, 1939-54 and President of the Baptist Union, 1955. *What Baptists Stand For* was first published in 1947 and went through five editions, the fifth being published in 1964 and a paperback version in 1973.

the Spirit brings it home to the heart and conscience (19-20) . . . For Baptists [an idea's] value is determined by its relation to the New Testament. If the idea or institution, whatever it is, can justify itself by the plain sense of Scripture, Baptist by their own fundamental position are bound to accept it, but if, on the other hand, as sometimes happens, the idea or institution, so far from finding any warrant for its existence in Scripture, seems in fact to contradict its plain and simple sense, Baptists are bound to reject it (20).

Baptists have been accused of 'literalism' . . . and it is hinted that they are less open to the 'progressive' thought (26) . . . Baptists [are not] obscurantist . . . Verbal Inspiration is not a specifically Baptist doctrine . . . What is vital for Baptists is not a rigid adherence to the letter of Scripture but the unshakeable confidence that in the New Testament we have the historic revelation made by Christ to His people for their guidance in all essential matters affecting the Church's witness and practice (27-28) . . . Baptists frankly recognise that our understanding of Christ's revelation must inevitable be a growing thing (28) . . . Baptists are prepared to stand or fall by the total impression made on the mind by the record taken as a unity and read in its simple, natural sense (29).

Robert C. Walton,¹¹ *The Gathered Community* (London: Kingsgate, 1946).

The authority of the Word for [the men of the Reformation] lay in its vitality, its power to reproduce a distinctive life and experience. This is the authority of Scripture today. We cannot quote them as proof-texts which settle an argument once and for all, nor study them apart from their historical and literary criticism. The authority of the Bible is only for those who read it diligently, lovingly and with understanding, and not until men read the Bible in this way can they understand why they should read it and what claim of authority it has over their lives (115).

'The Baptist Doctrine of the Church',¹² *Baptist Quarterly* 12.12 (October 1948): 440-48.

¹¹ Robert Walton was minister at Waterbarn (1932-38) and Victoria Road, Leicester (1938-43) and General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement (1943-49).

¹² This was a statement agreed by the Council of the Baptist Union in March 1948. It was written by a group chaired by Percy Evans, who was the Principal of Spurgeon's College, and which included Ernest Payne. The statement's purpose was a contribution to the Lund Conference of Faith and Order, W. M. S. West, *To be a Pilgrim: A Memoir of Ernest A. Payne* (Guilford: Lutterworth, 1983), 82.

The Scriptures are held by us to the primary authority both for the individual in his belief and way of life and for the Church in its teaching and modes of government. It is the objective revelation given in Scripture which is the safeguard against a purely subjective authority in religion. We firmly hold that each man must search the Scriptures for himself and seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit to interpret them. We know also that Church history and Christian experience through the centuries are a guide to the meaning of Scripture. Above all we hold that the eternal Gospel — the life, death and resurrection of our Lord — is the fixed point from which our interpretation, both of the Old and New Testaments, and of later developments in the Church, must proceed (442).

Robert Child,¹³ 'The Authority of Scripture', *The Fraternal* 92 (April 1954): 7-11.

To appeal to the Bible now means for many little else than plunging the matter into further uncertainty. Not that [people] do not respect the Bible in some sense. But they have lost the old unhesitating assumption that the Bible always means what it says, and that what it says is easily ascertainable and authoritative (7) . . . if we are to recover the authority of Scripture we shall not do it by simply trying to set the Bible before men, saying, "There is the Word of God and you must obey it." That would be to provoke its rejection. Surely if the Bible really is the Word of God, the right way of demonstrating its authority is to give it a chance to speak for itself, and, experience will prove that the authority which at the outset we have refrained from claiming for it will at length be freely conceded to it (8).

My answer can perhaps best be expressed by four adverbs which I will try briefly to expound. We must read the Bible *receptively* — that is, in approaching it, we must lay ourselves frankly and fully open to its message, trying to rid our minds of bias and to study it with a humble desire to discover the truth (8) . . . We must study it *Christologically* or, if you like, with Jesus Christ as our guide . . . the true guide to it is Jesus Christ the Son of God. He is the clue to its final meaning . . . It is ultimately His authority which breathes through the Biblical record and makes of it the Word of God to human hearts and consciences. Through His Spirit He Himself must become its Interpreter to us if we are to read the story in all its sweep and profundity, and to see how

¹³ Robert Child was Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford, 1942-58 and President of the Baptist Union, 1954.

every part of our life — its badness as well as its goodness, its failures as well as its successes, can, if we are ready, be used and transfused by God's redemptive purpose so that it reveals His love, and serves His holy will (9) . . . Thirdly, we must read the Bible *critically* . . . if the Bible is to become again an authority for life on the grand scale, to give meaning and worth to families, to nations and churches, then to achieve such an aim involves getting to grips with its structure and its plan. It means taking the Bible patiently book by book, trying to put each in its proper setting, examining its origins and its purpose, studying its language and ideas, comparing and contrasting the message of different authors, or of the same author in different contexts (10) . . . Finally, we must read the Bible, if I may so put it, *ecumenically*. I mean, we must read it as members of one great family, the family of God's people in Christ — a family which includes the Past as well as the Present, and in which others besides ourselves have their recognised place . . . The real reason why conscientious Christians draw apparently contradictory conclusions from the Bible is not usually that one group is entirely right, and all the rest are wrong, or self-deceived. It is that the truth embodied in the Bible like the truth embodied in life, transcends the grasp of us all (10-11).

We need to share with one another the insights which God gives to us. Admittedly, the authority which emerges from such a study will be of a different kind from that of former days, but it will be more deeply rooted in reality. It will be less dogmatic in its claims, less confident in its assertions. Its edges will not be so sharp and clear-cut. But I believe it will be more healthy and enduring, in so far as it represents the conventions of minds freely responding to the Spirit who has been promised to us to lead us into all truth (11).

George Beasley-Murray,¹⁴ 'The Minister and His Bible', *The Fraternal* 92 (April 1954): 11-16.

A Protestant minister is pre-eminently a minister of the Word. He is a man with a Book. From that Book he derives his message and

¹⁴ George Beasley-Murray was Principal of Spurgeon's College, 1958-1973, having been a Tutor at Spurgeon's, 1950-56, Professor of Greek and New Testament Interpretation at the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüsçhlikon, 1956-58. He left the Principalship at Spurgeon's to become James Buchanan Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1973-1980. He was President of the Baptist Union in 1968.

authority. Through it he learns of his Lord. It is his constant companion.

Most will agree that the Bible is not to be equated with Revelation but is the record of Revelation (11) . . . If it is right and natural for us to investigate the origins of the documents of the Bible; to distinguish between life-setting and content; revelation and record; then Biblical criticism is unavoidable. The burners of the Revised Standard Version engage in it as truly as the Revisers whom they cheerfully consign to hell. They merely disagree in their respective conclusions. To assign the Pentateuch to Moses is as truly a critical affirmation as to assign it to a line of redactors, for the Pentateuch is anonymous. The sooner we recognise this state of affairs the better it will be for us all. Biblical criticism is inescapable . . . Critical questions are matters of fact, to be investigated in a spirit of adventure not of fear. We need the guidance of the Spirit, not bludgeons to defend Him (13).

The unrealistic use of the Bible often revealed in preaching indicates a lack of concern as to its real meaning. Allegorism is still rife, and the Bible is then made to yield precisely what is wanted from it. The only remedy for this is a rigorous study of the Bible with the aid of scientific commentaries (14).

Paul Beasley-Murray, in his biography of his father, references an unpublished paper his father wrote in 1982 entitled 'Recovering the Authority of the Bible.'¹⁵ Paul writes, quoting the paper:

For [my father] 'the Bible may be referred to as the Word of God, namely in its function as witness to the Gospel.' With Luther and Calvin he 'affirmed the trustworthiness of the Bible as an infallible authority in matters of salvation and the life of faith'; and with them too he acknowledge that it 'contains normal human flaws and failings' which can be sorted out by scholarly study.

Paul then quotes from the final two paragraphs of his father's paper, which include the following:

We affirm that the authority of the Scriptures resides in God in Christ who works through the Holy Spirit with the Scriptures. The word of God in the Bible claims its hearers and readers as the Holy Spirit burns its message into their hearts.

¹⁵ Referenced in Paul Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for the Truth: A Personal Portrait of the Life of George Beasley-Murray* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 174-76.

Ernest A. Payne,¹⁶ *The Appeal to the Scriptures* (London: Baptist Union, 1960).

For our Baptist forefathers the Bible was “the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience . . . the rule of Faith and Life.’ So it is for us in the twentieth century . . . Our appeal is fivefold in character. We appeal to the Scriptures. We appeal to the Scriptures as a whole. We appeal to the living Word of God enshrined in, and conveyed by, the written word. We appeal to the living Word of God enshrined in the Scriptures and authenticated to us by the Holy Spirit at work within our own minds and hearts. We appeal to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself made known to us in and through the Scriptures (3-4).

The Constitution of Baptist Revival Fellowship, 1964¹⁷

The divine inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture as originally given and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

Bernard Green,¹⁸ ‘The Gospel in Relationship with Bible, Creeds and Theology’ in *The Communication of the Faith* edited by L. G. Champion (Bristol: John Wright & Sons, 1964), 23-36.

We cannot accept any view of the Bible which sees it as the mechanical product of men who wrote every letter and word which God dictated to them . . . Their message comes to us through finite minds and in human terms. Yet it is more than the result of human thinking . . . The living experience of God is the authority behind their witness . . . Therefore, in a real sense God speaks through them. We shall find that He seems to speak more clearly to us in some parts of the Bible than in others. We shall find development of understanding within its pages which makes it necessary for us to judge one part by another and realize the limitations of the writers as children of their age. Yet all the time — and here is the paradox of revelation to which we have referred — we shall be listening to God and not simply to someone giving an account of their personal experience of God (26-27).

¹⁶ Ernest Payne was General Secretary of the Baptist Union, 1951-67 and President of the Baptist Union, 1977.

¹⁷ The Baptist Revival Fellowship was a conservative evangelical Baptist grouping that existed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, see Phil Hill, *The Baptist Revival Fellowship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

¹⁸ Bernard Green was General Secretary of the Baptist Union, 1982-90.

. . . In asserting an objective authority to the Bible we do not thereby lay emphasis on the letter. God is not restricted to the words through which His inspired messengers have proclaimed His Word . . . If we are too rigid in our view of the Bible we shall fall into the dangerous error of treating “the Bible” and the “Word of God” as interchangeable and identical terms, which they are not . . . we must avoid any rigidity of biblical teaching that would lead to extreme dogmatism, false ecclesiasticism or legalism in ethics. Such things are never far away from a rigid biblicism.

Morris West,¹⁹ *Baptist Principles* (London: Baptist Union, 1960).

. . . It is not enough for us to say simply that our ultimate authority is the Bible. Certainly it is, but the Holy Spirit takes the things of Christ and interprets them today. On one point, however, Baptists have been and remain quite adamant — any claim that the Holy Spirit can, through an individual or through a community of the Church, produce doctrines and practices which clearly either contradict or are not in harmony with the revelation of Christianity contained in the Word of God — must be rejected absolutely. (8) . . . This fundamental fact is that the Bible is the Word of God . . . it is proclaiming the glory and the authority of the Bible. Behind the Bible stands God, and God alone. (9)

Brian Haymes,²⁰ *A Question of Identity* (Leeds: Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1986)

The Bible is authoritative, significantly more so than preacher, pastor or pope. It has also been understood that personal or corporate claims to receive direct divine illumination by the Holy Spirit have to be brought to the test, not the least, of scripture (14) . . . I wish to affirm its unique authority . . . The Bible bears the all important witness to [Christ] but it is not itself the Word . . . 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 . . . The Bible is authoritative. It is for me a major resource for the meaning and living

¹⁹ Morris West was Principal of Bristol Baptist College, 1972-87 and President of the Baptist Union, 1979. *Baptist Principles* was first published in 1960 and went through three editions, the third being published in 1975. Ian Randall calls it a ‘best-selling booklet’, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005), 354.

²⁰ Brian Haymes was Principal of Northern Baptist College, 1986-1994 and Principal of Bristol Baptist College, 1994-2000 and President of the Baptist Union, 1993. A revised edition of *A Question of Identity* was published by the *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* 4 (November 2021).

of the life in Christ unto salvation. It is inspired but that is not to deny its humanity and limitation. (16-17)

Nigel Wright,²¹ *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991)

Baptists acknowledge *the supreme authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and conduct* (22) . . . When we refer to the authority of the Bible, what is intended is that the authority of God in Jesus Christ is mediated through the earthly means of Scripture (23) . . . ‘The Baptist way’ is to test all things by the Scriptures (24) . . . the authority of the Bible is a dynamic and a living authority among God’s people. The Spirit speaks through it, and although it is possible to describe what we hear him saying we are not in a position to give the last word on it . . . A truly Baptist understanding recognises that our understanding of Scripture is not complete (25) . . . Baptist Christians are essentially evangelical . . . I use the term to indicate an intention to live under the authority of Christ as made known decisively in Scripture. It has to do with acknowledging the priority of the Scriptures for our knowledge of God. To be sure, there may be debates about what we find there and how we apply it . . . the intention to live under the authority of Scripture is fundamental and can be the common ground on which many can meet even if they then disagree in good faith on matters of interpretation (26).

Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

Christ is seen as the Word of God to whom the Scriptures give normative access in their written testimony . . . The Bible is to be interpreted *christologically*, with Christ as the key for interpreting and reading the whole. Reading and heeding every part is important, but the Bible is not a flat book with every part of equal significance: Christ is the centre and makes sense of the whole. This leads to a different approach from the balancing of texts in that it inclines the discussion of disputed issues in a more theological direction. The Bible is read through Christ who is the clearest revelation of the Father and from this core a theology of the Triune God emerges in the light of which the individual texts of Scripture may be understood in true perspective. It is still true that the texts must be wrestled with but a more

²¹ Nigel Wright was Principal of Spurgeon’s College, 2000-2013 and President of the Baptist Union, 2002. See also Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1996), 44-57 and Nigel G. Wright, *Vital Truth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 191-204.

theological approach to the interpretation of Scripture will sometimes mean that they are treated more metaphorically than literally (22-23).

Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd and Michael Quicke,²² *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley, 1996).

The view taken by our Baptist parents who gave us the Declaration is [that] our final authority is Jesus Christ, to whom the Bible witnesses. Of course, as Baptists we certainly do not want to downgrade the scriptures. We have always honoured the Bible as the Spirit-inspired gift of God to his people, the reliable place where we can expect to hear the living Word of God. But we read it and interpret it, with the help of the Holy Spirit, as witnesses to the one who is the Word of God in the fullest sense, Jesus Christ . . . Because Scripture is the inspired witness to the Word of God, we can use our minds to discover the way that this Word came to people in their own time and place, and so how it can come alive for us today (29-30).

Paul S. Fiddes,²³ *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

Absolute authority belongs to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and the Bible witnesses to this Word. Baptists certainly do not downgrade the Holy Scriptures; they have always honoured the Bible as the Spirit-inspired gift of God to the people of God. But taking scripture seriously does not mean treating it as a collection of proof texts which are applied to back up a set of rules and regulations; it means finding scripture to be a place of encounter with the Spirit of Christ who conforms our personalities to his. It is the reliable place where we can expect to hear the living Word of God, who comes to us with unexpected demands and challenges in our own moment in history and culture. It is the place where we can hear the judgment of Christ upon the reader, and also upon the assumptions of the human writers of the text in their own time. Scripture always serves the authority of Christ (51).

²² For Fiddes and Haymes see above and below. Richard Kidd was Principal of Northern Baptist College, 1994-2013. Michael Quicke was Principal of Spurgeon's College, 1993-2000.

²³ Paul Fiddes was Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford between 1989-2007. In 2002 he was appointed Professor of Systematic Theology by the University of Oxford. See also Paul S. Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue Between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999 [1991]), 12, 23, 45 and also Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Canon as Space and Place' in *The Unity of Scripture and the Diversity of the Canon* edited by John Barton and Michael Wolter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 126-49.

John E. Colwell,²⁴ *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Paternoster, 2005)

If the Christian Scriptures . . . are read as the Church's text, they are read within the context and traditions of the interpretative community which is the Church catholic. And within this catholic community the Scriptures cannot signify just anything; there are theological constraints to reading which, if transgressed, identify a reader as no longer effectively participating in this community (93).

. . . since the Spirit who is the mediator of the speaking of this Word is simultaneously the mediator of the hearing of this Word the Church, with confidence, can expect the reading and hearing of Scripture to be a performative and transformative event, a mediation of the gracious presence and action of God, a sacramental act (97) . . . To acknowledge Scripture as sacramental, as a means of grace, is to acknowledge both the meditating agency of the Spirit and the mediating instrumentality of the human text (98).

The authority of Scripture within the Church, therefore, cannot be reduced in some legalistic manner in terms of supposedly inerrant propositional truths or supposedly absolute rules; the authority of Scripture within the Church consists rather in its recollection of God's mediated speaking through this text and its prayerful expectation of God's future mediated speaking through this (103) . . . Scripture is a means of grace in order to change us; the intention and effect of Scripture's sacramentality is our sanctification; through the hearing of Scripture we are changed by the Spirit who speaks through Scripture (104).

Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross,²⁵ *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

²⁴ John Colwell was Tutor in Christian Doctrine and Ethics, Spurgeon's College, 1994-2009. See also John Colwell, 'The Word of His Grace: What's So Distinctive about Scripture?' in *The "Plainly Revealed" Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* edited by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer, 2011), 191-210 and John Colwell, 'On Language and Presence' in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes* edited by Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47-60.

²⁵ Ruth Gouldbourne is a Baptist minister and from 1995-2005 she was Tutor in Church History and Doctrine, Bristol Baptist College. Anthony R. Cross was Director of the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Regent's Park College, Oxford, 2009-2012 and Editor of the Paternoster Press series *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (2001-09).

The Bible is a crucial text for us. It is, after all, the church's book. We shall refer to it again and again, but we do not think that quoting a text settles any matter under discussion. We believe that essentially reading the Bible is a corporate discipline, requiring the help of teachers, chief among whom is the Holy Spirit . . . The Bible must be read historically, since it focuses on divine acts and persons in history. This means that it must be read in several contexts; its original setting, its editorial restatements, its continuing reading in the life of the church and our present context (7-8).

Stephen Holmes,²⁶ 'Baptists and the Bible', *Baptist Quarterly* 43.7 (July 2010): 410-27.

For Baptists, then, authority in the church is primarily the authority of the living Christ, who makes His ways known to His gathered people through His Spirit in His Word, the Scriptures (420).
. . . this theological claim says nothing about hermeneutics . . . our Baptist vision is actually in principle opposed to any formal account of Biblical hermeneutics, if we mean by that a definition of right and wrong ways to read the Bible . . . a proper theological account of Scripture will lead us to reading practices that are appropriate to the nature of the text we are reading, and so "better" (i.e., "more faithful to the text") than other practices. However — the decisive point here — better/more faithful reading practices are no guarantee of our right hearing of the Word (421) . . . God's Word in Scripture is constantly awkward, angular, surprising. We do not have neat tools to control and dissect it. It captues us in unexpected ways; it subverts our expectations, evades our classifications, and overturns our assumptions. Our task is, in humble, prayerful dependence on God's Spirit, to be open and attentive to the way in which Christ shall choose to address us today.
. . . This account of the nature of Scripture points to the livingness of the Word . . . In Scripture we find . . . the living word of the living Christ (422) . . . We come to the Bible asking how Christ calls us to live . . . it is to hear Christ's call to this covenanted body of His people, in this place, at this time (423).

²⁶ Stephen Holmes is a Baptist minister and Senior Lecturer in Theology, University of St. Andrews, having previously taught theology at King's College London. See also Stephen R. Holmes, 'Baptists and the Bible', *Baptist Quarterly* 43.7 (2010): 410-27 and Stephen R. Holmes, 'Kings, Professors and Ploughboys: On the Accessibility of Scripture', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13.4 (October 2011): 403-415.

Beth Allison-Glenny, Andy Goodliff, Ruth Gouldbourne, Stephen Holmes, David Kerrigan, Glen Marshall, and Simon Woodman,²⁷ 'The Courage to Be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality', *Baptist Quarterly* 48.1 (2017): 2-10.

On the authority of Scripture: theological affirmations

1. Christ's ways are made known to us in God-breathed Scripture, which is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.' (2 Tim. 3:16)
2. 'Each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [Christ's] laws.' Therefore, the primary context for hearing and understanding Scripture is the gathered local church.
3. The task of Biblical interpretation is unfinished, and will remain unfinished until the Lord's return. 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.'

On the authority of Scripture: practical consequences

1. That the task of Biblical interpretation is unfinished does not mean that the church cannot reach a settled place on certain issues: the affirmation of Christ's deity, or the repudiation of slavery, would be examples of settled issues.
2. How may we discern whether an issue is settled? Only when there are no credible arguments remaining to the contrary.
3. Groups of churches may nonetheless come to agreement that a particular issue is settled amongst them, even if still disputed in the wider church. Baptist churches unite around the claim that 'Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ', for instance.
4. We British Baptists have united around a minimal statement of shared principles and so modelled living together in unity and love despite differences. Because of this we live with a measure of disagreement on the interpretation of Scripture, even on issues that we have discerned as settled amongst us. We have, for example, affirmed the call of women to the ordained ministry or allowed the remarriage of divorcees, but not sought to disassociate churches that disagree on these points.

²⁷ Beth Allison-Glenny is Chaplain and Tutorial Fellow in Theology, Regent's Park College, Oxford; Simon Woodman is minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London; David Kerrigan was General Director, BMS World Mission, now retired; and Glen Marshall is Co-Principal, Northern Baptist College, Manchester.

Part 2: Towards a Baptist Understanding of Scripture

1. Every person reviewed above takes Scripture seriously and argues that it has authority in the church. There is a common view that Scripture is unique and the 'primary' source of revelation of God and his acts for the church and the individual. Nigel Wright identifies this as making Baptists evangelical. Baptists have historically had a strong identification with evangelicalism, for example, every General Secretary of the Baptist Union has defined themselves as an evangelical.²⁸ Yet at the same time, Baptists are not simply evangelicals, as if that was all there is to say, partly because the meaning of evangelical among evangelicals is and has been contested, but also because nearly all Baptists approach Scripture starting with the authority of Christ.
2. There is an overwhelming emphasis that Baptists read the Bible christologically. Interpretation of the Bible is centred on Christ. Baptists read the Bible to know Christ and what it means to be his disciples. Christ is the 'fixed point from which our interpretation . . . must proceed' ('Baptist Doctrine of the Church'). The authority of Scripture is linked to the authority of Christ. We know Christ from the Scriptures *and* Christ speaks to the church through the Scriptures.
3. Alongside the christological focus is a second emphasis that Baptists read the Bible with the help and aid of the Holy Spirit. If Scripture is the Word of God speaking to us this is dependent on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only inspired the authors of Scripture, but also illuminates the meaning of Scripture for those who read it.
4. There is a strong understanding that the Bible is not the Word of God in a simple sense. Baptists see Christ as the living Word of God and the Bible is the Word of God only in the sense that the Scriptures bear witness to the Word. Green sees it as a 'dangerous error' in simply viewing the Bible as the Word of God. Here is a careful distinction between Baptists and other evangelicals and a right ordering of authority, which differentiates Christ from the Bible, claiming the authority of Scripture is dependent on the prior authority of Christ.

²⁸ See Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 71-72.

5. There is a recognition from some that it is appropriate and important to read the Bible critically, meaning that Baptists should seek to understand the Bible as literature and as a historical text. Henry Wheeler Robinson, H. H. Rowley, and George Beasley-Murray were biblical scholars of international reputation and English Baptists have contributed much to the academic study of the Bible.²⁹ There have been a small number of Baptists very suspicious of biblical criticism, evident in 1920s, but their impact was ultimately limited.³⁰ Biblical criticism has generally been accepted, and even seen as a good, but at the same time, the claim — most clearly made by Rowley and Holmes — is made that it is not necessary for understanding.
6. Alongside reading the Bible critically, others highlight that the Bible should be read within the context of the catholic tradition, what Robert Child calls ecumenically. This is to stress the Bible is the Church's book and not something to be read primarily as individuals. Holmes speaks of the 'dangers of just reading the Bible.'³¹ Tradition has a place in offering 'tracks' for how Scripture is to be read.³² Clearly any reading of the Bible in English is dependent on those who have done the work of translation, which has a long-reaching tradition.
7. The tradition, while important, does not close the Bible from continuing to speak in new ways and in new contexts. The question for Baptists is always what is Christ saying through Scripture to us today? We find the language of Scripture is described as 'dynamic' (Wright) and 'living' (Payne, *Something to Declare*, Holmes) and our understanding and interpretation as 'growing' (Cook), 'surprising' (Holmes) and 'unfinished' ('Courage to be Baptist'). Several Baptists understand that they read Scripture in the tradition of the separatist John Robinson who famously said, 'the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.'³³

²⁹ See Anthony R. Cross, "To Communicate simply you must understand profoundly": *Preparation for Ministry among British Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2016), 231-301.

³⁰ As David Bebbington concludes, 'Fundamentalism could make little headway among English Baptists', 'Baptists and Fundamentalism in Inter-War Britain' in *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century* edited by David Bebbington and David Ceri Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 114.

³¹ Stephen R. Holmes, 'The Dangers of Just Reading the Bible: Orthodoxy and Christology' in *Exploring Baptist Origins* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas Wood (Regent's Park College, 2011), 123-37. See also Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002) and especially chapter 1, 'Why Can't We Just Read the Bible', 1-17.

³² I use the word 'tracks' in the way that Paul Fiddes does in *Tracks and Traces*, 1.

³³ Cited in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 22.

8. From some, like Wright and the authors of the ‘Courage to be Baptist’, there is an acknowledgement that there will be diversity and disagreement over the interpretation of Scripture. Others speak against a ‘dogmatism’ (Green) and rather for a modesty and a plurality. Sean Winter and Helen Dare have both explored how Baptists might cope with this diversity in interpretation, and that it is not something to fear or to neuter.³⁴

9. Finally, but not unimportantly, there is something about obedience to Scripture. Scripture, as the speaking of the living Christ by the Spirit, has authority over us. Faith and practice are learned from the reading of Scripture. For Baptists, this is perhaps most clearly seen in the practice of believers’ baptism. Baptists are those who seek to live faithfully in accordance with the Bible, particularly the witness of the New Testament (Cook). For Cook and almost certainly the members of the Baptist Revival Fellowship, this was found in Scripture’s ‘plain sense.’ This was, and is, the way some Baptists believe the Bible should be read, but the majority of those surveyed in this article consider a more open practice of interpretation, dependent upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is necessary. This suggests that they believe the ‘plain sense’ is not always that plain and that Scripture speaks more than just ‘plainly’, which is how the church catholic has read the Bible too.³⁵

Note on Contributor

Andy Goodliff is minister of Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend-on-Sea and Lecturer in Baptist History and Theology, Regent’s Park College, Oxford.

³⁴ See Sean Winter, *More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective* (Oxford: Whitley, 2007); Sean Winter, ‘Persuading Friends: Friendship and Testimony in Baptist Interpretative Communities’ in *The “Plainly Revealed” Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* edited by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), 253-70; Helen Dare, *Always on the Way and in the Fray: Reading the Bible as Baptists* (Whitley, 2015); Helen Dare, ‘Re-membering our Hermeneutics: Baptists Reconciling (with) Interpretative Diversity’ in *Reconciling Rites: Essays in Honour of Myra N. Blyth* edited by Andy Goodliff, Anthony Clarke and Beth Allison-Glenny (Regent’s Park College, 2020), 48-70.

³⁵ See for example, Jason Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again: Reading the Bible in Communion with the Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

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- To encourage the sharing of good theological, biblical and historical research by Baptists
- To support pastor–theologians in academic publishing
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We welcome submissions from Baptist pastor–theologians.

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

Cover Image

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