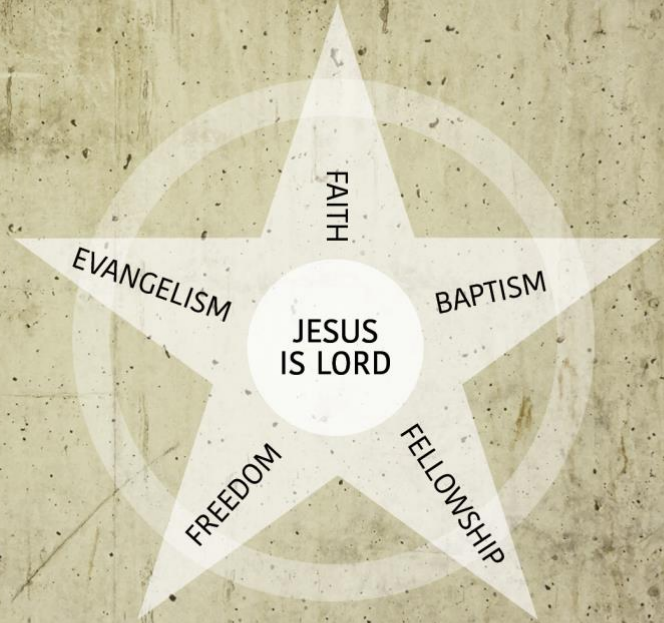


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# Journal of Baptist Theology

*in context*



Issue 9 (2023)

# Editorial

Sally Nelson

Issue 9 of *JBTC* is very timely: it offers us something of a lens on the way Baptists approach (and potentially resolve) differences of opinion. Sometimes it feels as if we stretch and strain our covenantal relationships to breaking point and wonder whether we can remain a Union. In these pages we may find both challenge and encouragement from the past as we navigate current contested issues.

Tim Judson offers a careful contribution to the fragile territory around the revision of the ministerial guidelines on (same-sex) marriage (SSM). He outlines the parameters of the debate and acknowledges an important paradox: first, we might infer that there is ‘an answer’ to this question; but second, that since changing the ministerial rules is a binary choice, we do in fact have to identify one way forward: either we change them, or we do not. Transcending our differences is a delightful ideal that is unlikely to be realised, though he argues that we can hope to witness to a spiritual unity that recognizes true Christian discipleship in those who think differently from ourselves. Indeed, he says ‘I have written this for anyone whose perspective is such that one cannot be a Christian if they hold a certain view’. Tim explores a doctrine of sin that posits a disturbed relationality that leads to distorted conflict (as opposed to ‘God-given’ conflict, which allows for mutual flourishing within difference). Sin in this understanding is about turning inwards, rather than vulnerably reaching out to the other. This helpful repositioning of Genesis 3 on the interpretation of human sinfulness is useful in the SSM conversation. Tim explores the inauthenticity of a church whose solidarity is that of a collective of isolated individuals and argues in its place for a true solidarity located in Christ, which embraces difference without constantly drawing boundaries around it. The unity of the church, he argues, is a divine reality and not something we create or facilitate. Tim laments the mutual isolation we are beginning to choose over the SSM debate.

With this contemporary – and divisive - issue in mind, it might come as a surprise that Jeff Jacobson declares that the adoption of the new constitution of 1873 was the ‘seed of one of the most trying times in Baptist history’. It is 150 years since the DoP was initially formulated and Jeff’s fascinating dive into the Downgrade and the subsequent evolution of the theological basis of the Union, now encompassed in the DoP, may provide some relief from our

current anxiety about theological difference within our movement. Baptists have historically internally contained various deep theological differences, and these differences periodically surge up and threaten to engulf us. Jeff explores the idea of whether for Baptists, theology is prescriptive or descriptive, and whether we can be happy with ‘implicit’ doctrine, which has the advantage of being an expandable vessel that can hold various opinions and views in tension. Our Baptist unity is often demonstrated in shared practices rather than doctrinal statements; though this has led many to wonder whether our DoP and its predecessors are theologically ‘meagre’. In the light of this, Jeff wonders whether the lack of an explicit reference to the Trinity in our current version of the DoP is an oversight – yet interestingly, explicit reference to the Trinity is also missing in scripture itself. I am reminded of an Anglican colleague’s response to the DoP when he encountered it recently: ‘It’s brilliant! The more I think about it, the better it is’. Sometimes less is indeed more.

The issue draws to a fitting finale in Andy Goodliff’s survey of how Baptist have approached scripture in the past 100 years. With a helpful range of quotations from many of our leading scholars over this period, Andy exposes multiple Baptist perspectives on scripture’s authority and its place in our denominational life. He concludes with nine key points about our use of the Bible as Baptists, such as our agreement about its importance while simultaneously recognising that its authority is accessed via a common christological lens: it is not the Word of God in a biblicist manner but rather in the way that it reveals the Lord Jesus to us. Baptists always like the practical outworking of any theological thought and so Andy’s ninth key point is a fine place to conclude, declaring that as Baptists we live in obedience to Christ *through* the Word and how it shapes our faith and life together.

There is great wisdom in this issue of *JBTC* for our day. There is nothing new under the sun, after all; and in remembering that our forebears have gone this way before, we may find new hope for the discernment to which we are called.

## *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*

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### **Aims**

- To encourage the sharing of good theological, biblical and historical research by Baptists
- To support pastor–theologians in academic publishing
- To offer the wider Baptist family thoughtful work which will aid their life and mission

### **Submitting to Journal of Baptist Theology**

We welcome submissions from Baptist pastor–theologians.

All submissions to be emailed to Andy Goodliff ([andy@goodliff.com](mailto: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.