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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.

Baptist (Dis)Unity and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Socio-Doctrinal Understanding of the Church¹

Tim Judson

Abstract

In October 2022, The Baptist Union of Great Britain decided to undergo a process of exploring a possible change to on the current rules for ministerial recognition regarding same-sex marriage. This followed a petition by many ministers who wanted the rules to become more inclusive, which resulted in many other ministers petitioning to keep the current rules in place. This article offers a theological argument for the unity of Baptists Together, not despite the differences we hold, but precisely through recognising these differences in our confessional life together. Rather than seeking common ground or a mutual likemindedness, we witness our mutual isolation from God and one another as a (dis)union of congregations, who are soteriologically bound together in Christ's salvific isolation for us. I do not seek to offer an either/or opinion regarding the current ministerial recognition rules. Instead, I challenge Baptists to consider a deeper and more profound source of Christian unity, which constitutes a different paradigm for approaching our life together in the particularities of our polity.

Key Words: same-sex marriage, Bonhoeffer, Baptists, ecclesiology

Introduction

On the sixteenth April 1963, the Baptist preacher and Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., reflected from prison on his travels throughout the American south. His goal had been to understand the systemic schemes and spiritual stories that were written upon the hearts, minds, and bodies of his fellow human beings. In particular, he wanted to understand what fed the imaginations of his White sisters and brothers who, like him, claimed to

¹ It is with heartfelt gratitude that I dedicate this essay to John Colwell, who has been a fellow pilgrim and companion over the last three years, and has charged me to find my own voice. This article probably won't achieve that goal fully, but will hopefully be a step in the right direction.

worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ. As he explored, he witnessed the beautiful architecture of White segregationist churches, true churches that preached the word and observed the sacraments faithfully, whilst simultaneously supporting racial segregation and its concomitant logic for civil laws, both within its polity, and in the public sphere.² King was confronted with a perplexing question as he viewed these sacred spaces, asking himself, ‘What God do these people worship?’³

For King and many of his Black brethren, anyone who pledged allegiance to the vision of a segregated society, could not simultaneously pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ. There were some who disagreed with him, manoeuvring the message of the Gospel to legitimise and even serve racism, or alternatively, to simply relativise its impact as a merely secondary issue. Many White folks considered issues of segregation to be less crucial for a life of faith. They were willing to settle with things as they were, either in the name of God’s providence as they understood it, or by way of a reluctant resignation to their bodily privilege at the expense of others. However, for King and other Black (and some White) believers, this was not a secondary, and therefore an avoidable situation for Christian discipleship. Whilst a society’s loci of power can undoubtedly shift and evolve in time and space, King and others confronted what they believed to be a demonic assertion of power that was, in their minds, anti-Christ, and subsequently, in direct opposition to any coherent vision of human flourishing whatsoever. The *salvation* (and I use that word intentionally) of both Black and White was inseparable, though the concrete realisation of that salvation in human history would obviously require a redressing of their unique stories in diverse ways, encompassed within the story of God we read in the Scriptures.

Division and Difficulties for Baptists

Whilst I could continue writing specifically about racism, my intention has been to foreground the critical importance of concrete issues, not primarily from a practical perspective, but in terms of how our doctrine and ethics inevitably situate and further narrate our life together. In this essay, I want to contribute to another concrete discussion. As I type (October 2022), I am filled with a certain amount of fear and trembling, as well as no small amount of sorrow. Baptist Union Council is currently deliberating over the present ministerial recognition (MR) rules pertaining to same-sex marriage (SSM), and

² Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 85–87, 96.

³ Staughton Lynd (ed.), *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 477.

has agreed on a process to explore what our churches think. At the end of a relatively short period (as far as extensive processes go), a decision will have been made. A pragmatic orientation towards this debate will result in a Yes or No regarding same-sex marriage for accredited Baptist ministers. Our endeavour is constrained upon us to decide within a polemical, either/or manner, leaving less space than some would desire for contemplation, questioning, and a more attentive, theological and biblical enquiry within our polity.

I am not writing from within a vacuum (as though that were even possible). I have good friends within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, both ministers and members, who believe differently to one another about this situation regarding MR rules. I, like others, am seeking to be attentive to viewpoints from different perspectives and am (I hope) open to what the Spirit of Christ might be saying. Certain spaces where this debate is being carried out are intense and hot. I appreciate the reasoning behind some of the extreme discourse that is being deployed. It is lamentable and painful to witness the dehumanisingly dismissive vitriol coming from both extremes, as battle lines are being drawn against those who ‘cannot possibly be true disciples of Jesus.’ Oh, the grievous and perpetual irony of our human race; we cannot even agree on what is dehumanising!

I sympathise with how hurt or afflicted people feel, and I also suggest that such rhetorical violence makes many of us feel silenced, for fear of getting caught in the crossfire. Perhaps not putting our heads above the parapet (in our preaching, public witness or church stance) is merely a cowardly attempt to evade entering the arena to share in the melee of a genuine discussion (or what may sometimes seem like a fight). However, I am picking up (though I could of course be wrong) that a large proportion of our so-called ‘dysfunctional Baptist family’⁴ carry viewpoints that are held closely, if loosely, with genuine openness to being challenged on a theological, biblical and ethical level. It is difficult to engage when we are pre-emptively funneled down a polarised avenue by loud and therefore dominant voices, being forced (perhaps by minorities on the extremes) to choose a side that we may not be altogether aligned with. The context of Council’s decision carries a lot of angst, which many of us sense, and for which we continue to pray for those involved in the process before us. Of course, there is also the added texture of many diverse points of departure for the complex continuum of postures within both these perspectives.

⁴ Thanks to my friend, Charmaine Mhlanga for coining this phrase for our movement.

Again, I could be speaking just for myself (though I doubt it), but often, the subject matter quickly becomes less significant than the manner with which a lot of the discussions have taken place. If Jesus had been sinful on the way to the cross, then the cross would have been a waste of time, and whatever *telos* we arrive at within this debate will be vindicated or condemned by the means and ways by which we get there, like Christ himself. To put it differently, we know this is an important issue, which affects individuals and communities in significant (existential, soteriological and missiological) ways, and we are aware that it is understandably painful for many people to engage in it, and so many of us are humbly seeking spaces to hear and dialogue over the issue, ‘journeying together’ as some have said. We want to take it seriously, to *feel* and to *think* and to *pray* about it in communion, in a way that does not force us to buy into the false dichotomy of whether we supposedly care more about either the Bible or loving people. To me, such a juxtaposition is myopic and fails to witness to the full and ultimate reality of God in Christ, whose person and work is the costly reconciliation of all things. Of course, such a reality, such a Gospel, requires qualifying within our theological anthropology, but we do that as those who must appreciate our fallible and necessarily limited human horizons, which requires due consideration of our distinct ecclesiology as Baptists as well.⁵

On a personal level, my deep sadness is that I may potentially lose my baptistic union with someone for whom I care, whatever the outcome. I have a close friend, a Baptist minister, from whom I have learnt a tremendous amount about this subject, who experiences what they call ‘same-sex attraction’ (SSA), but from whose reading of Scripture, believes *they* are called to a life of celibacy. This person has informed me that they would feel unsafe within a union of churches that affirmed the choice of ministers to marry someone from the same sex. In other words, they believe their commitment to singleness as an outworking of their *personal* discipleship to Christ would be jeopardised if the MR rules changed, as the rules would engender a *communal* position that cannot but contradict and compromise the upholding of an individual choice for this specific minister.⁶ It would represent a fundamental rupture in their salvific participation in Christ, leading them to a regrettable departure from our union of churches. They would feel unsafe, but moreover,

⁵ I am only starting to think about the radical nature of a Baptist political theology, and wonder whether the way we “handle” this issue could be a gift to other streams of the church, and indeed, to the world. My thanks to Andy Goodliff for pushing this idea in *The Ruling Christ and Witnessing Church: Towards a Baptist Political Theology* (Oxford: Whitley, 2022).

⁶ Of course, if the rules change within Baptists Together, there is nothing stopping this person retaining their sense of vocation to remain celibate, though I fully appreciate that their sense of this becomes fraught with difficulty and “temptation” if they are in a denomination that purports they do not need to remain like this.

would be concerned that their desire to ‘flee from sexual immorality’⁷ would be undermined, placing their discipleship and allegiance to Christ at risk. I respect that (for them) their own discernment regarding discipleship to Christ would be incompatible with an amended stance of our movement, and so they would leave Baptists Together if the current rules were to be changed.

Conversely, I have a friend who is earnestly hoping for the MR rules to be changed, so that they can joyfully enjoy a committed marital relationship with someone of the same sex and have a recognized, covenantal union in this particular manner, alongside (and within) their existing vocation as a Baptist minister. Currently, they do not want to come out because they feel unsafe to do so within the Baptist family, as it currently stands. I am also aware that there are other people who are married to someone of the same sex, but who are unable to have their sense of (corporately discerned) calling recognised within the institutional boundaries we currently uphold.

Whilst all these people feel unsafe at the prospect of different parameters for our institution,⁸ the very prospects of what would make them feel unsafe are different, diametrically opposed even. I have been in the universal Church long enough to realise that such a dream of just agreeing to disagree can rarely be achieved and can sometimes be a naïve evasion of taking a stance, often at the expense of the more vulnerable. More seriously, for someone like me to just shake my head at those who cannot simply agree to disagree may unwittingly compound the pain and hurt that is experienced by others for whom this issue is not merely theoretical, but personal, visceral, and has real, not just concrete, but again, salvific implications.⁹

⁷ 1 Cor 6:18.

⁸ This issue surely highlights that we are indeed an institution, and not a ‘movement’ as some prefer to say. Framing our Union using either term engenders different postures by which we navigate our MR rules, both in terms of our history and our relationships. Whether the rules “move” or not, they are institutional, and therefore concrete and systemically binding, for good or ill.

⁹ When I use the term, ‘salvific,’ I am appealing broadly to the influences upon my own thinking that have amalgamated together in what I hope is a holistic and faithful approach to the liberating work of God in Christ. These influences include the Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, the Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Black liberation theologians, James Cone and Anthony G. Reddie, the scholastic Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, the (Baptist) Old Testament scholar, Helen Paynter, the New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, and more recently, the womanist theologian, Kelly Brown Douglas. In the last eight years however, my paradigm has undergone extensive broadening and sharpening under the thought of the Black Baptist theologian, Willie James Jennings. I share all this in the hope that my use of the term, intentional as it is, does not become reduced to the reader’s own thinking, but I also hope they might recognise where my own awareness is lacking and incomplete.

That said, whilst I recognise that this is a necessary discussion for all of us to engage in, I wonder whether the very predicament we are faced with is an opportunity for us to recognise a deeper theological grounding for what it means to be Christians, and more specifically, Baptists together. What I will present is not intended to posit an opinion either for or against the proposed changes to our MR rules. That would be premature and I am quite honestly wrestling with this live issue with all its contentious perspectives. However, nor am I advocating that we try to celebrate a vague, pseudo-Baptist notion of unity in difference in a conceptually abstract way over this issue. Such a paradigm, when pushed to the spatiotemporal extremes, is full of contradictions, and cannot stand in and of itself without potentially marginalising someone. Attempts at a solution that somehow (and quite imaginatively) overcome the impasse between the conservative/liberal or radical/progressive divides will leave some people marginalised, confused, and feeling unsafe.¹⁰ Nor do I seek to convince us that we should try and transcend our differences and thereby avoid having to consider what we believe concretely in an ethical sense. To quote one of our college principals, ‘There are times when you can’t not make a decision.’¹¹ People within this union of churches are currently affiliated, whether we like it or not, to a certain viewpoint that has held prevalence. Whether actively or passively, we are aligned to a particular vision, and we must bear in mind that deciding not to decide is to decide, albeit passively.¹² Rather than trying to make a case for what is good, right and true for this debate, my intention here is, I think, lowlier, rudimentary, and more important.

In this article, I will try to make a case to simply argue that, whichever view we hold regarding SSM, we can say with integrity that we are disciples of Jesus Christ, and that others who hold a different view can be as well. In fact, I think we have an opportunity within the midst of this feeling of painful disunity to witness a form of spiritual unity that is deeper than any conceptual theological ethic with which we might fly our flag, or put our stamp. *I believe that whatever view people take, they can nevertheless become disciples of Jesus, and therefore, a part of his*

¹⁰ I do not have space here to discuss what it means for a person to “feel unsafe” but I simply acknowledge that it is far more complex a phenomenon than what an individual themselves can self-constitute epistemologically.

¹¹ Steve Finamore, Principal of Bristol Baptist College, rightly made this point within a discussion on biblical hermeneutics within a new resource on equality and diversity created by Baptists Together, entitled ‘I am because you are.’ His point is clear in reference to this topic. We either change the rules, or we do not. Given the language that was adopted in the past with the particularity of appropriate sex in mind, those are the options we have given ourselves now.

¹² *DBWE* 12, 165; *DBWE* 13, 256. Thomas Aquinas (I-II, Q71 A5) makes a similar point in reference to James 4:17, suggesting that not acting or taking a stance does not necessarily protect us from sinning, because ‘sin can also be without act.’ See *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), 900.

body. Conversely, I believe that the views people take do not necessarily make them disciples of Jesus, nor a part of his body. What I am trying to say is that, pragmatics notwithstanding, I do not regard this issue as a litmus test for faithfulness and discipleship to Christ per se. There remains the question of what way we are called to go together (or not together), and some of us may fall short in obeying Christ's concrete call, but that does not mean that I should be excluded from the Lord's table alongside others who disagree with me. As King questioned *who* the White American churches worshipped, this process (and not just the outcome) may reveal *who* we worship as Baptists Together. You may already agree with my claim; in which case, you are welcome to finish reading at this juncture. I have written this for anyone whose perspective is such that one cannot be a Christian if they hold a certain view. Whilst we cannot avoid a concrete, institutional line for these MR rules, I hope my essay might give hope to some of us who are concerned about our witness to Jesus Christ, who, through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, reconciles humanity to God, to others, and to this world. I believe that our struggle and conflict over this issue might enable us to embody a faith that is in Christ alone, who *binds us together, not despite, but precisely within the very midst of our disparate viewpoints and postures*. On a more basic level, I hope it might ground us in humility within the midst of our different conversational spaces, so as not to demonise others or reject them as either Pharisees or apostates.

To construct my case, I will draw on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose insights have been helpful in many ways. It is not lost on me that Bonhoeffer has been easily co-opted to serve the theological agendas of many competing voices. To quote Craig Gardiner, 'It is a lot easier to plunder Bonhoeffer for material than, say, Karl Barth.'¹³ This is maybe a problem with Bonhoeffer, or it could be a sign that his work, in contrast to someone like Barth, was unapologetically contextual, and therefore, though sadly, all too easy to misunderstand and misconstrued for ideological ends. Bonhoeffer wrote his first doctoral thesis on a theological sociality of the church, which was later published as *Sanctorum Communio*.¹⁴

¹³ Craig was really helpful during the initial stages of my PhD thesis, when I was considering whether to focus on Bonhoeffer or Barth for my studies on lament.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 1, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Kraus and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), henceforth *DBWE* 1. Additional references to *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. and Barbara Wojhoski, 17 vols (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996–2014), will be indicated by *DBWE*. I drew on this work during my own PhD studies, Tim Judson, *Awake With Christ in Gethsemane: Lament and Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023), and some of the key themes he presents can be traced through his writing, right up to his last years in prison. *Sanctorum Communio* (*SC*) covers topics such as personhood, individuality, community, sin, soteriology, Christology, solidarity, and the essence of faith.

As stated above, I do not intend to solve the problem we face within this comparatively short discussion. However, I hope to convince some readers towards what I think is a radically orthodox form of faith in Christ, which is faithful to our Baptist roots, and which might ground us all within the *struggle* of this debate, as a conduit for Christian existence, and not (necessarily) an obstacle. Our solidarity as Baptists Together may actually be, Christologically speaking, far more disarming and discomfiting than any of us would choose in and of ourselves, and may position us all within this discussion with a renewed mind.

Creaturely Conflict and Sinful Inhumanity

Something that comes through very strongly in Bonhoeffer's writing is the creaturely nature of human being.¹⁵ None of us are the *creator*; we are the *created*. None of us are *infinite*, but *finite*. None of us are unlimited, either epistemologically, ontologically, spatially, temporally or however we might construe humanness. To be human means that we are not divine. This is not bad, providing that we embrace the gift of our existence as fallibly free human creatures. The thing about being human is that we rub shoulders with other finite human creatures in the world, in complex and dynamically contingent ways. To be truly human means that my life is continually opened to reality afresh. What is 'real' takes hold of me within my creaturely life and forms me in itself, rather than me forming a notion of reality within myself. To deny my limitations, my interdependence, and my need, would be to shirk the humanity that God has graciously given me, as a life-giving gift bestowed through relationship with both him, others, and the world. The spatiotemporal difference between you and I is something that God has crafted, so that we might flourish distinctly and deliberately alongside one another, rubbing shoulders in sharing our life together.

Inevitably, our creaturely existence, with the limitations and concomitant differences between us, constitutes an ontological distinctiveness between our individual humannesses. The particularity of the space we each inhabit with our creaturely bodies engenders conflict. This type of conflict does not necessarily have to be bad or sinful. Indeed, our creaturely differences (should) remind us of our mutual need for one another in our limitations and unique spatiotemporal particularities. Apart from sin, conflict is good. It is a necessary aspect of life that prompts humanity to embrace the freedom of their limitations. Indeed, before sin, conflict offered a boundary that constituted

¹⁵ For the best example, see *Creation and Fall* in *DBWE* 3.

creaturely freedom and mutual flourishing.¹⁶ If I recognise you in your distinct space, I will not impose upon you or coerce you into my space, because the conflict ensures we embrace one another for the healthy mutuality of our creatureliness. However, because of sin, ‘human beings have lost their creaturely nature.’¹⁷ Conflict which naturally arises amidst creaturely difference becomes distorted, and has destroyed the gift of simple, unmediated community between individuals and God, and with one another.¹⁸

It is worth pausing on what we mean by sin here, given its obvious implications for our current issue, and the varied ways it is used, which informs a related soteriological import. Martin Luther’s dictum of the *cor curvum in se* (the heart turned in on itself) provides a helpful orientation for Bonhoeffer’s hamartiology. I also think this encapsulates something of the heart of the matter in our discussion. In Eden, Adam and Eve seek to become like God, seek to be limitless and infinite, which is an inseparable turning away from creator, fellow creatures, and creation. Sin entails the ‘ontic inversion into the self, the *cor curvum in se*.’¹⁹ The integrity of their humanness, which resides in their free *relation, creatureliness* and *obedience*; in short, the *imago Dei* bestowed on humanity is rejected. We can interpret both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to be biblically iconic/theological representations of how God fixes the necessary conditions for the *imago Dei*.²⁰ The commandment to refrain from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a spatiotemporal (i.e. creaturely) referent from which, through its obedience in relation to God, humanity encounters the centre and limit of its freedom ever anew.

Through eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve seek to become *sicut deus*, like God, which carries a simultaneous rejection of their humanness.²¹ They forsake and transgress the God-given conflict which would otherwise enable them to thrive alongside one another.²² It is *not* that they have merely broken a moral code. Whilst

¹⁶ *DBWE* 1, 84–86. Also, *DBWE* 3, 98–99. A doctrine of sin derived primarily from Genesis 3, and not from Christ, can be problematic. See John E. Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 68–69.

¹⁷ *DBWE* 3, 126.

¹⁸ *DBWE* 1, 63.

¹⁹ *DBWE* 2, 46.

²⁰ Joel Lawrence, ‘Death Together: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Becoming the Church for Others,’ in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture* edited by Keith L. Johnson and Timothy Larsen (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 117.

²¹ *DBWE* 3, 115–16. Also, *DBWE* 4, 282.

²² It should not be lost on us that there is a primordial conflict with creation itself, as a means of humanity’s living in freedom, which, once transgressed, leads to the destruction of creation by its creatures.

important, that does not remotely capture the gravitas and irreversible profundity of what they have done. Rather, they have staked a claim to be arbiters of morality itself, to be the judges of good and evil, to set the horizons and boundaries of truth.

He declares himself good, he declares himself bad, but whether good or bad, both declarations are merely attempts at least to be secured; but he does not recognize one thing, namely, his own guilt before God in his good and his evil, guilt consisting precisely in wanting to self-posit and self-secure himself once and for all.²³

Humanity have acted in a manner that irreversibly claims the role of constituting (in themselves) what it means to be (a good or evil) human. In so doing this, they have unwittingly elected for themselves, either the unbearable anxiety of deliberating over what is good, right, and true, or they have elected a self-justifying epistemological source from which they may appeal to this or that ethic, which is ultimately nothing more than the myopic vantage point of a self-righteous sinner. And the profound thing is that no one wants to admit that they are the one who has fundamentally turned inwards in this regard, having reduced God, the world and others to the epistemological mastery of the individual self.²⁴

I do not think we should read Genesis 3 in a hereditary, fatalistic sense, as though this passage somehow explains the problem of evil. Genesis 3 is just as much descriptive as prescriptive. The narrative is far too real for us to ignore that we are in that Garden too. We are Adam and Eve.²⁵ We are a people who

²³ *DBWE* 10, 401. Where possible, I have tried to make Bonhoeffer's language gender-inclusive, but in this instance, it would involve too many amendments to make it faithful to Bonhoeffer's emphasis here on the individual. That said, there is a necessary critique offered to nuance Bonhoeffer's thinking where his own imaginative horizons are limited. See Jennifer McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 365–82; Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009); Chung Hyun Kyung, 'Dear Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Letter,' in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, edited by John W. De Gruchy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

²⁴ Gen 3:11–13.

²⁵ Though Bonhoeffer would also have us recognise ourselves in another garden too, with Jesus in Gethsemane, as he asks his disciples to stay awake with him. Barth makes the same point about the Fall and notions of "original sin." The notion that human sinfulness is biologically hereditary and therefore inevitable is not only theologically distorted and fatalistic, but oppressive and repulsive. In fact, it paints humanity as a tragic race that is not enslaved to sin, but created in

have brought and continue to bring such chaos, disorder, pain and suffering into this world because we are all seeking to be the judge of what is good and evil, however, piously, biblically, experientially, authentically, or faithfully we try. For humanity to try and be like God means nothing other than self-determined solitude, deriving the truth of God's Word in reference to its own conscience, which is sinful humanity's last attempt at control of God and the world.²⁶ 'The person gains command of the world by elevating [themselves] into a tragically isolated individual.'²⁷ By acquiescing in the objectivity posed by the serpent's question and advice, humanity rejects its imaged being, leaving it simultaneously divided and alone.²⁸

This is where we would do well to draw on a doctrinal necessity for the dialectical sociality of human personhood. A person is an *individual*, who lives in *relation to others*. They cannot be a person in isolation, and nor can they be a person if their individuality is dissolved into a collective. This structure ensures that the person is free, or to be blunt, truly human. The problem arises when a person rejects this structure of their human creatureliness. Sin effects an irreparable rupture and brokenness in human personhood.²⁹ The state, or rather, the human propensity to inhabit this introspective, self-deifying, pseudo-personhood, is referred to by Bonhoeffer as humanity 'in-Adam.' This is a designation for humanity that has elected its own isolation and cannot reverse it because of the unassailable perpetuity and piety of the *cor curvum in se*.³⁰ Sin is the self-elected enclosure within the self. This manifests itself in

robotic fashion to sin throughout history as a cosmically determined inevitability. Barth argues, 'there can be no doubt that the idea of a hereditary sin which has come to [people] man by propagation is an extremely unfortunate and mistaken one ... "Hereditary sin" has a hopelessly naturalistic, deterministic and even fatalistic ring.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 500, 501.

²⁶ *DBWE* 2, 158–59; *DBWE* 10, 406. Bonhoeffer also qualifies that conscience and the Lord direct our response to the state, *DBWE* 16, 517, though maintains that conscience is precarious if we are in Christ, precisely because we are not ultimately in our own conscience, *DBWE* 16, 265, which is the wisdom of human nothingness, *DBWE* 16, 487. See also *DBWE* 9, 463, 483.

²⁷ *DBWE* 10, 396.

²⁸ *DBWE* 3, 119–20, 122.

²⁹ *DBWE* 3, 66, 80. Also, Clifford Green, 'Human sociality and Christian community,' in *Cambridge Companion*, 118.

³⁰ Eva Harasta notes that the notion of sin 'aligns with [Bonhoeffer's] overall relational and soteriological framework' because it 'allows for integrating the specifically personal and social manner of human beings,' which 'expresses Bonhoeffer's relational ontology.' Eva Harasta, 'Adam in Christ? The Place of Sin in Christ-Reality,' in *Christ, Church and World*, 68. Tom Greggs argues that we should 'identify the ultimate foundational *res* of [Bonhoeffer's] theology as ecclesiology.' Tom Greggs, 'Bearing Sin in the Church,' 78. See also *DBWE* 1, 141. However, without a Christological prerequisite (i.e. Christ as its origin, mediator and goal, as per section 2.1), the church understands its existence in itself, leading to an ecclesial *cor curvum in se*. See *DB-FS*, 350–51. Greggs dogmatically highlights this danger. See Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 121–47.

numerous ways, but it is a helpful way of framing the individual worlds and stories that we all inhabit, and the continual struggle we face to live alongside those who are different, which includes the dynamics of Christian societies present with one another. Humanity ‘in-Adam’ lives in a paradoxical form of solidarity, whereby people exist together in absolute and mutual isolation from God and one another, as a disparate collective in solitary self-destruction.³¹ Sin is solidarity as isolated units, which is ultimately a solidarity that has no substance or life in it.³² Any claim of solidarity with others cannot exist in and of itself. We are so locked in our own self-orientation that we cannot achieve genuine liberation and communion together. Any claim to an embodied-ness with one another is a sinful illusion, deceptive, elusive, abusive, coercive and imposing to the detriment of some, or all of us.

New Humanity

In contrast to humanity in-Adam, Jesus Christ does not share in sinful human solidarity because *he is an altogether new humanity*. This God-human is not enticed into the introspective fallenness of finite humanity, but is free. As the one who is—not only bestowed with but actually *is*—the *imago Dei* on earth, Christ fully enters the misery of a broken world that lives under the sorrowful self-condemnation of bodies who have aborted from God and one another.³³

While the old humanity consists of countless isolated units—each one an Adam—that are perceived as a comprehensive unity only through each individual, the new humanity is entirely concentrated in ... Christ, and only in Christ is it perceived as a whole. Christ has a function that sheds the clearest light on the fundamental difference between Adam and Christ, namely *the function of vicarious representative* ... Adam’s action is extremely egocentric. That its effect closely resembles a deliberately vicarious representative action must not obscure the *entirely different basic premises*. In the old humanity the whole of humanity falls anew, so to speak, with every person who sins; in Christ, however, humanity has been brought once and for all—this is essential to *real* vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]—into community with God ... *the principle of vicarious representative action* can become fundamental for the church-community of God in and through Christ. Not “solidarity”, which is never possible

³¹ DBWE 1, 92. Also, DBWE 1, 117, and DBWE 6, 114, 125.

³² See DBWE 10, 396; DBWE 14, 733.

³³ DBWE 15, 361.

between Christ and human beings, but vicarious representative action is the life-principle of the new humanity. True, I know myself to be in a guilty solidarity with the other person, but my service to the other person springs from the life-principle of vicarious representative action.³⁴

This has radical implications for so much of church life in general. Solidarity in this strict-Christological sense,³⁵ means that we cannot relate or live alongside others in any manner other than as disparate, mutually isolated individuals. That is all that we have in common. That is our solidarity. We are a bunch of sinful hearts turned in on themselves. This sounds awfully bleak, but it is critical to understanding the radically different and new humanity that Christ represents for us all. Without Jesus, all we have in common is that we are self-referential. To caricature Bonhoeffer's thinking here, we are essentially egotistical because we (especially the powerful and privileged) are unable to avoid placing our own horizons (or world, or story, or experience, or metaphysical *a priori* etc.) at the centre, inadvertently foregrounding the self over God, others, and creation.³⁶ Humanity in-Adam reaches for those who are similar to it, with whom it can relate or comprehend, because it feels secure in what is familiar and graspable. With even the best intentions, sinful humanity *is* only open to others insofar as others can be utilised to exacerbate the individualistic world and story of what it means to be human within the sinful separatedness of us all. In direct contrast, Christ's person and work is a genuine break with the continuous battle of the *cor curvum in se*, not solidarity, but *vicarious representative action* (*Stellvertretung*). Andrew DeCort qualifies this dense term as 'Christ's willing initiative to *stand in our place on our behalf*, to be our representative and thus to take everything we had coming to us and to give us all that he is as our own.'³⁷ To summarise, 'Christ reveals himself to be "one for the other."³⁸

We can substantiate this point via a *theologia crucis*. The cross identifies each human individual in their self-focussed solitude. In the death of Christ, God reveals God's judgment regarding this form of human existence that humanity has elected for itself. To God, it only leads to death (broken relationships,

³⁴ *DBWE* 1, 146–47. See also *DBWE* 4, 219.

³⁵ I recognize that this is a take on "solidarity" that is uncommon.

³⁶ One of the huge problems of theology historically is that White modernist paradigms have failed to reckon with this, refusing to navigate the geography and peculiar existentiality of our horizons. Something that theologians from the global majority offer is that they recognise the unavoidable and important place for particularity and context guiding the thinking and practice of theology.

³⁷ Andrew DeCort, *Bonhoeffer's New Beginning: Ethics after Devastation* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress, 2018), 106.

³⁸ DeCort, *Bonhoeffer's New Beginning*, 106.

shattering the limits and potential of our createdness etc.). At the cross, every individual is Adam/Eve. Each person stands alone before God.³⁹ The cross is the means through which God in Christ allows human self-righteousness to appear right, but through it, God justifies Godself and God's intention for human existence, thereby pronouncing or exposing humanity as a humanity both deceived and guilty.⁴⁰ The cross of Jesus identifies humanity in its solitude.⁴¹ However, 'In the resurrection of Jesus Christ his death is revealed as the death of death itself ... and the humanity-of-Adam has become the church of Christ.'⁴²

Humanity does not suddenly stop being sinful. Rather, it is precisely in its solidarity as a collective of individual sinners who are isolated from God and one another, that they witness God's vicarious self-isolation in Christ, as the overcoming of humanity in-Adam's individualism. Jesus is without sin, without any self-preferential treatment towards himself or his own epistemological introspection, and he steps into the isolation and bleak disarray of sinful human existence as the only one who is genuinely for others. In doing this, God (in Jesus) has borne and embodied the inhumanness of all sinful humanity. In real terms, the concrete presence of sin, suffering and sorrow remain, but they remain as those things which are now incontrovertibly judged and redeemed eschatologically in Christ.⁴³ Because we are so inclined towards abstractions (and even experience is often extremely abstract), the displacement of the old, Adamic humanity by Christ's new humanity happens in the context of time and space. Anything else is impossible to exist in genuine creatureliness. The revelation of this reality breaks into world history ever anew by the Holy Spirit to establish the new humanity, witnessed and witnessed to as the church.⁴⁴ Thus, 'Community with God exists only through Christ, but Christ is present only in his church-community, and therefore *community with God exists only in the church.*'⁴⁵ Whilst Christ and the church are not

³⁹ *DBWE* 1, 150.

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 12, 398; *DBWE* 14, 608–9. See also *DBWE* 10, 406; *DBWE* 11, 298.

⁴¹ I do not have space to explore this in terms of how Jesus interacts with the other two men alongside him, but it is worth pondering. I am also reminded of the way White and Black folks responded, largely in different ways, to the murder of George Floyd. 'Responsibility: A reflection on our responsibility as white Christians in a world where George Floyd was murdered,' *Baptists Together*, accessed 17 October 2022. <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/589057/Responsibility.aspx>.

⁴² *DBWE* 1, 151–52.

⁴³ *DBWE* 1, 142–43. Also *DBWE* 6, 92; *DBWE* 11, 300.

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 1, 144. Also *DBWE* 14, 455.

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 1, 158. For Bonhoeffer, 'A Christian who stays away from the assembly is a contradiction in terms.' *DBWE* 1, 227. This is because believers are never beyond needing to receive the gift of salvation anew. 'Thus they seek the assembly not merely out of gratitude for the

totally identical—because Christ has ascended to heaven and we still wait his return—being in Christ is synonymous with being in the church.⁴⁶ This is not to claim that the church has the monopoly on truth of the Gospel per se. Rather, the distinct nature of the church is one where a distinctly different community exists within this sociological space, one which is not constituted by a Christian ethic or common experience, but by the vicarious representative action of Jesus Christ, who has usurped our sinful self-isolation (which really is the beginning of ethics⁴⁷) in order to transmute our Adamic pseudo-humanity into his new and truly real (creaturely) humanity with God, others, and the world.

***Stellvertretung* over “Solidarity”**

Stellvertretung heals (in)humanity through utterly breaking with, and thereby remaking it into something genuinely new, ‘that is *constituted* by being gracefully welcomed and included “in Christ.”’⁴⁸ Christ’s *Stellvertretung* simultaneously overcomes sin and reconstitutes a new humanity founded by, guided by and directed towards Christ as its vicarious representative. But *how* does this happen? Christ is the only one who frees humanity-in-Adam *from* its enclosure within itself, and frees humanity *for* God and others, because Christ genuinely ‘is for others.’⁴⁹ God is free from any selfishness or sinful introspection (or ‘ontic inversion into the self’⁵⁰) and so God in God’s freedom is free for the creation that God has made. As the one who is without sin (the *cor curvum in se*), Jesus (and only Jesus) can vicariously embrace and represent the inhumanity of those who abandon him, entering their self-isolated space as the one who, as representative of a distinctly different form of human existence, is for them over and against their self-isolation, making them isolated no more. Tom Greggs notes, ‘This act of incorporation is salvific in that it frees human beings from their individualism, allowing them to discover a new identity in Christ and the community of the church.’⁵¹ To put it another way, Jesus enters the space of those who are locked in their own self-destructive space, revealing

gift they have already received, but are driven by the desire to receive it ever anew, to be born anew again and again.’ *DBWE* 1, 228. It would be ideal to trace this thinking, and its development over the course of Bonhoeffer’s writing, but space sadly does not permit it.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 1, 140. See also Michael Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127–28.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer considers ethics to be the result of humanity’s attempt to secure itself abstractly against God, even (apparently) in the name of God. See *Ethics*, *DBWE* 6 and also, *DBWE* 9, 267; *DBWE* 10, 365; *DBWE* 11, 167, 297–98; *DBWE* 12, 202, 210; *DBWE* 14, 471, 967; *DBWE* 16, 542, 555, 561.

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, *DBWE* 6, 107.

⁴⁹ See *DBWE* 8, 501.

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 2, 46.

⁵¹ Tom Greggs, ‘Ecclesiology,’ in *Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 235.

himself as for others who are unable to be anything other than for themselves, and refuses to be repulsed by them. Concretely, this means ‘it is from the other that the Christian learns who he or she is as a new human being.’⁵² Community is established by Christ alone, not on the individual’s ability to attach themselves to God or another through a self-constituted solidarity. Any such thing is unavoidably still about the self as it is based on the perceived purpose or utility that can be wrought from another individual to serve one’s own self-referential personhood. Jesus died for my sins, but that cannot be anything other than an arresting away from my sinful self-isolation.

Critically, this does not mean we should utterly reject notions of solidarity in a broader sense. In fact, there are numerous citations where Bonhoeffer endorses it and even deploys the term as a mark of Christian discipleship.⁵³ John de Gruchy even unites the two seemingly opposing terms by summarising Bonhoeffer’s vision for a church living in ‘vicarious solidarity with the world in its need.’⁵⁴ To get a sharper sense of how Bonhoeffer might help us here, it is worth observing a later comment in *Sanctorum Communio*, as he discusses where faith can perceive and experience the church most clearly. For him,

this certainly does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists with the church; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord’s Table, and intercede for one another in prayer.⁵⁵

Societies and communities of people are generally (and quite naturally) established and maintained through the dynamics of shared experience, cultural norms, or feelings of likemindedness (moral, economic, tribal and so on). During the October 2022 Baptist Union Council, Lynn Green stated, ‘It struck me in preparing for this we get caught up in our differences ... But we don’t want to lose sight of all we agree on. There’s so much common

⁵² Greggs, ‘Ecclesiology,’ 235.

⁵³ Most notably in *DBWE* 6, 233; *DBWE* 10, 326, 530; *DBWE* 11, 329; *DBWE* 12, 198, 256–57, 262–63, 289; *DBWE* 13, 22, 56, 316; *DBWE* 14, 298, 491, 766; *DBWE* 15, 312, 426; *DBWE* 16, 365. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of *Stellvertretung* becomes more radical later on, which nuances the dialectic between being ‘in-Adam’ and ‘in-Christ.’ See Harasta, ‘Adam in Christ?’ 74.

⁵⁴ John W. De Gruchy, ‘Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,’ in *DBWE* 8, 25.

⁵⁵ *DBWE* 1, 281. Bonhoeffer also argues it is ‘extremely dangerous to confuse community romanticism with the community of saints.’ *DBWE* 1, 278.

ground.⁵⁶ This is a legitimate approach to take, and I appreciate the General Secretary is in a different position to myself, with a pressing concern to maintain unity in a pragmatic and expedient sense throughout the forthcoming process. Yet, we could also look at it in a different way. Maybe we do not need to get caught up in our differences at all. Instead, perhaps rather than seeing our differences as problematic, they could be the conduit through which we find a deeper form of authentic community in Christ, which is not built at all upon our own sense of likemindedness or apparent ‘common ground.’ Furthermore, an unmediated form of solidarity (which some could glean from Green’s approach) cannot ultimately overcome our human isolation, and cannot reconcile individuals to God or to one another. Whilst experiential connection may seem healthy on one plane, and is an accidental (in the philosophical sense) inevitability of creaturely life, it could deceive individuals into the illusion of pseudo-community, such that the collective only really exists for itself, for its tribe, perpetuating its egotism by refusing to believe in Christ’s overcoming of their mutual isolation. In such instances, the church (or denomination) exists for itself and its own piety, rather than the Lord Jesus, who is only embodied when we confess our inability to embody him ourselves.

From my perspective, any church community which attempts to nurture or maintain a sense of togetherness in itself may well be ignoring the ever-new revelation of God in Christ. Instead, the structure of Christian solidarity, to use a somewhat clunky phrase, is realised by Christ’s *Stellvertretung*, whereby he bears the entirety of human isolation, sin and suffering upon himself. Christ’s experience on the cross is not something humanity can grasp at through its own solidarity, and thereby revert towards itself. Christ is vicarious, acting apart from others, as the means of arresting humanity ‘in-Adam’ from itself, for a new life reconstituted in the form of *Stellvertretung*.⁵⁷ As such, the church perpetuates its isolation and ontological sinfulness by ignoring this very state as a collective of solitary individuals, and as a result, the boundaries which would protect individuals against themselves and others become assaulted in the name of solidarity. The anxiety that drives us to appeal to what we have in common can unintentionally form a basis for community that is at best provisional, at worst, imperialistic. Joel Lawrence summarises, ‘Relationships that don’t recognize the mediating presence of Christ become relationships of power in which the other is used for the sake of the self.’⁵⁸ Confessing sinful

⁵⁶ ‘Baptist Union Council: October 2022,’ *Baptists Together*, accessed 25 October 2022. <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID=645846>.

⁵⁷ See *DBWE* 6, 258–59.

⁵⁸ Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer*, 42.

self-isolation is the ‘concrete discipline that is essential for the community who would move from the *cor curvum in se* to being with others.’⁵⁹

Perhaps lamenting this painful situation together might be a more faithful witness to the Gospel than anything we have done thus far. I do not mean to diminish the important efforts towards peace-making and generating greater understanding between people. However, the difficult thing is that we sometimes will never agree with others, no matter how well we understand, or how well we try to be understood. What do we do then? Do we go our separate ways and assume Christ is not present amongst us? Rather, I think our response should be to come together in the hurt and dissonance, confessing the pain and sorrow this is causing us all, acknowledging our frailty and the divisiveness that we cannot overcome in ourselves. Even in Christ, that division will sometimes remain, but rather than synthesising into a magisterial theology, all we can do sometimes is confess that we cannot get there together. I cannot make you think and feel like me, and you cannot get me to embrace your space. Yet we do not have to remain utterly disparate and despondent. As we mourn and lament together that our union is fractured and feeble, the Spirit knits us together in our shared grief, a strange mercy that bleeds through our darkness and illuminates us all as the body of Christ.

Being Christian and Becoming Truly Human

Bonhoeffer would agree that we should have no time for utopian or pure ideals of the church, because it is a *divine* reality. ‘Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.’⁶⁰ Those who separate themselves from other believers reject the grace of God that confronts individuals concretely through other believers in Christ’s beautiful and broken body. ‘The reality of the church is understood not in moments of spiritual exaltation, but within the routine and pains of daily life, and within the context of ordinary worship. Everything else merely obscures the actual state of affairs.’⁶¹ ‘By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. For God is not a

⁵⁹ Lawrence, ‘Death Together’, 121. Lawrence explains that failure to acknowledge (or lament) their being ‘in-Adam’ means ‘There may be mutual associations, there may be warmth, there may even be moral acts of service that help others, but there is no true being for others.’ Lawrence, ‘Death Together’, 124.

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 5, 36.

⁶¹ *DBWE* 1, 281. Also, *DBWE* 5, 47.

God of emotionalism, but the God of truth.⁶² Accepting that *our own* thoughts or words or deeds cannot bind us is an alarming and disarming claim. We are the body of Christ ‘only by that one word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.’⁶³ Of course, we may be working towards this as a union, but we must be attentive to the temptation to reduce our unity in the Spirit to a mere idea of unity. God is not our thoughts about God, but confronts us in this crucible within which we struggle together.

Bonhoeffer is not being categorically inclusive here. Absolutely not! Those who refuse fellowship with others in the name of Christ separate themselves from Christ. What is different about Bonhoeffer’s context is that the lordship of Christ became subordinate to the *Volk* (people) of a German nation, which legitimised the exclusion of Jews from the church. We risk misappropriating Bonhoeffer here if we clumsily translate his context into this current debate. The German Christians ultimately excluded *themselves* from Christ’s body, despite that they thought they were merely excluding *Jews* from the church.

In recognising that we cannot achieve an ideal form of solidarity—which is forever imprisoned in an egotistical echo chamber—believers are called to embrace a new form of solidarity that binds them together only as reconciled sinners. On this basis, the community ‘begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it,’ and can encounter a form of community mediated by Christ.⁶⁴

In contrast to other Germans, who found a shared solidarity in their sense of identity as a *Volk*, Bonhoeffer based his solidarity with the Jews not on his own shared experience with them, but on Christ’s *Stellvertretung*.⁶⁵ Christ’s mediating relationship ultimately frees believers from concerns over whether they feel or relate to the one whom they are called to love. Rather, Christian love (through Christ’s *Stellvertretung*) is free from the abstract ideals or egotistical attempts towards epistemological dominion over the other, and is therefore free for a genuinely spiritual and truly human form of love mediated by Christ for a distinctly different other.⁶⁶ Without this, ‘everything that is originally and solely characteristic of the community mediated through Christ

⁶² *DBWE* 5, 35.

⁶³ *DBWE* 5, 36–37. Reggie Williams summarises that for Bonhoeffer, ‘idealized humanity was an obstacle to encounters with the incarnate Christ, and thus to real Christian community’, Reggie L. Williams, ‘Bonhoeffer and Race,’ in *Oxford Handbook*, 383.

⁶⁴ *DBWE* 5, 35.

⁶⁵ See *DBWE* 14, 491. By recognising solidarity with others in this mediated way, Bonhoeffer anticipates a deeper relationship with others because it is based on what is ‘real’ in accordance with Christ. See *DB-RW*, 79.

⁶⁶ See *DBWE* 15, 426. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:26.

reappears in the nonmediated community of souls in a distorted form.⁶⁷ Love may appear selfless when mustered from within the self, and may involve the most striking of sacrifices, but in a form that is nevertheless a covert mode of *selfish* self-love.⁶⁸

Self-centred love loves the other for the sake of itself; spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ. That is why self-centred love seeks direct contact with other persons ... It wants to do everything it can to win and conquer; it puts pressure on the other person. It desires to be irresistible, to dominate.⁶⁹

With Bonhoeffer, I am attempting to articulate a grammar for relationships which is peculiar to Christian faith, and is upholding the dignity and particular difference of others that constitute the reality of being human in the world together. Christ establishes and mediates the boundaries between human persons, binding them together through his own vicarious representative action, not through cultural norms or abstract ideals, and this safeguards the vulnerable or supposedly weak (or outnumbered) from the assault of dominant others, however well-meaning the love of others might be in trying to love them. When someone is suffering in some way, it is not as faithful as we might think to offer advice or comfort from within our epistemological world. When that happens, all we witness is that Job's friends are alive and well. We should be cautious of initiating love from within our own unmediated self-reference (which is always limited and potentially imposing or coercive). It is less violent and abstract to be present with a person by accepting them as a distinct 'I' who is different to the 'You' that I determine them to be from within myself. To put it differently, others are who they are in reference to Christ, not in direct reference to me, and we witness that under God's word and at the Lord's table, where our relationship and community is mediated to us in the disparate nature of our inability to immediately relate.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 5, 41.

⁶⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 13:2–3. Of course, not all self-love is selfish. Those who think it egotistical to cultivate rest and leisure and to look after oneself may do well to consider Bonhoeffer's thoughts to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. 'I believe that a great deal of the exhaustion and sterility in our ranks [of ministers] is rooted in the lack of "selfless self-love."' Since this topic has no place in the official Protestant ethic, we arrogantly disregard it and become work obsessed, to the detriment of the individual and of the whole.' *DBWE* 16, 78.

⁶⁹ *DBWE* 5, 42.

⁷⁰ As I have stated, any sense of immediacy in our relationship is an illusion anyway.

Context: Human Sexuality and “Christian Solidarity”

Perhaps some of the discourse in our life together as Baptists has intended, with the very sincerest of intentions, to have been shared “in love,” but in a manner of love which is at times self-centred, refusing to acknowledge Christ as mediator between us all. We have wanted to be at the centre, when the tree of life is at the centre. Maybe our unity has often been built on notions of common ground, or doctrines that are erected from within our tribe (be it evangelical or liberal or conservative or whatever). To be in Christ means that we are dynamically saved from the tribalism that would offer us the comfort of sinful solidarity “in the name of Jesus,”⁷¹ and instead, salvation is offered within a community with whom I have nothing in common other than Jesus, who is our sole and absolute authority, as we read in the Scriptures and claim in the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle.⁷² Christ is the one who constantly arrests from us our own “truth” regarding sin, salvation, and true humanness, lest these doctrines and ethical concepts become a false witness.

The faithfulness of Christian theology, liturgy and ethics is incontrovertibly a witness to and confession of the universal lordship of Jesus Christ. I imagine and hope that such a notion might not seem controversial, but it becomes complex when the church is faced with the concrete challenges arising regarding the mode and context of its proclamation in the contingencies and complexities of social and political life. During the Third Reich, the German state ordered churches to ostracise Jews from their congregations. Bonhoeffer regarded this as a *status confessionis*, that is, ‘a confessional situation in which for the sake of the confession to Christ there was only one position that is in accordance with the confession to Christ.’⁷³ In his mind, excluding Jewish believers from the fellowship and protection of the Christian community was apostasy. Any church that incorporated the Aryan paragraph (i.e. excluding Jews) would no longer be the church of Christ!⁷⁴

Today, within conversations I have had with ministers from different perspectives, it would seem clear that some in Baptists Together are calling for

⁷¹ This gives a slightly different angle to Gal. 3:27–28.

⁷² The first clause of particularly pertinent, which states, ‘That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining 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.’

⁷³ Christiane Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 39.

⁷⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–33, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12. Edited Larry L. Rasmussen. Translated by Isabel Best, David Higgins and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 167.

a *status confessionis* over this issue regarding the ministerial recognition rules on same-sex marriage.⁷⁵ Some of us, and some of our churches, are withdrawing from fellowship with, or are declining to participate in mission with Baptists who hold a different view. I have heard of this situation from within both ends of the debate. We are becoming mutually isolated from one another. Recalling the desire to ensure that my different friends do not feel unsafe, I appreciate (as best I can within my limited horizons) the gravitas of this issue in a pastoral sense. However, I am wary of us appropriating the Nazi situation to our own, from either an affirming or non-affirming end. I do not personally think that we are in a ‘Bonhoeffer moment’ as some popular representatives are inclined to suggest.⁷⁶ The challenges facing us today are not new, and the church has continually found itself becoming divided over the latest issue of the day.⁷⁷ Our hermeneutical horizons are (often unwittingly) constituted by the culture, state, or ground that we inhabit. So often, the confines and opportunities of our freedom are granted to us, not by the Gospel of Christ, but by the world, and this forces upon us the kind of juxtapositions such as we are facing now, urging us to pick a side. But ‘The freedom of the church is not where it has possibilities, but only where the gospel is truly effective in its own power to create space for itself on earth, even and especially when there are no such possibilities for the church.’⁷⁸ Of course, we need to make a decision about the MR rules, but if the source of the decision is located in a goal for resolution, rather than in Christ, our discussion may find itself on sinking sand, because Christ is before over, under and after any human resolution. I do not mean to sound overly mystical or aloof, I merely think this is a moment in our life together to be prophetic, and maybe, simply, to truly be the church.

For so many of us, we are wondering how to be faithful in the midst of this painful ordeal. We have our own viewpoint, but we are not quite sure how strongly to hold onto it. Should we nail our colours to the mast and be willing to go down with the ship that carries our principles? Maybe that ship might take us elsewhere, away from others that we have journeyed with until now.

⁷⁵ On a more extreme level, this can have devastating ramifications, as Bonhoeffer’s own life demonstrates. When the German state ordered churches to ostracise Jews from their congregations, Bonhoeffer regarded it as a *status confessionis*. See Keith Clements, ‘Bonhoeffer and Ecumenism’ in *Oxford Handbook*, 81–82. See also *DBWE* 14, 676; *DB-CT*, 40.

⁷⁶ See Clifford Green, ‘Hijacking Bonhoeffer,’ *The Christian Century*, accessed 25 October 2022. <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/hijacking-bonhoeffer>; Reggie L. Williams, ‘Harlem’s Influence on Bonhoeffer Underestimated in “Strange Glory,”’ *Sojourners*, accessed 25 October 2022. <https://sojo.net/articles/harlems-influence-bonhoeffer-underestimated-strange-glory>.

⁷⁷ The Downgrade controversy springs to mind as a key moment in Baptist history, though I continue to maintain that the paradigm shift for early Jewish believers was far more overwhelming than either Downgrade, or this current situation.

⁷⁸ *DBWE* 15, 448–49.

One thing the church has been really good at over the years is falling out, and surveying Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology gives a bit more explanation as to why, because we are all unfaithful. As I said in my introduction, I do not want to offer a particular view here on which choice we should make for the MR rules. That is because, for me, a deeper, more life-threatening issue, is that we are forcing a dichotomy that jeopardises the heart of being the church. Faithfulness to Christ requires our common confession of him alone. Of course, we have different ways that we understand that, but an essential recognition of his absolute lordship is *all* that we need to bind us together (which ironically, is *all-encompassing of all* who declare this). That is why I get nervous when people qualify whether they are an affirming or non-affirming church, because, whilst it may help practically, it communicates something that undermines our proclamation of Christ's totality. We will not find this easy, and we should not be surprised if we struggle to let go of our preconceived assumptions. At times our unity in Christ alone will feel thin, weak, maybe even barely distinguishable. But our (Christian) community is not based on a regimental togetherness, collective common ground, a graspable *modus operandi* or a strong "feeling" of unity, nor a clear demarcation (at this present age at least) of who is a sheep or goat, a prophet or a wolf in sheep's clothing.⁷⁹ Our faith in Christ does not depend primarily or constitutively on our ability to create our own boundaries, deceptive and nice and secure as they may feel sometimes. To use an earlier quote of Bonhoeffer's, true faith in Christ

does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists with the church; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord's Table, and intercede for one another in prayer.⁸⁰

John Colwell foregrounds the Lord's Supper as 'the central celebration of the Church's life and essence, given as a sign and focus of its unity,' which, ironically, 'has become the principal sign and expression of its division.'⁸¹ Is it not tragic, and yet also a clue for us here and now, that we are divided over things that could be the most profound source of our unity. If we were to

⁷⁹ A sobering thought is that a wolf in sheep's clothing will see a sheep when they gaze in their own reflection!

⁸⁰ *DBWE* 1, 281. Bonhoeffer also argues it is 'extremely dangerous to confuse community romanticism with the community of saints.' *DBWE* 1, 278.

⁸¹ John E. Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 176.

confess and let Jesus be lord over the church, lamenting our utter ineptitude to do this ourselves, we might relinquish control over what it means to be the body of Christ who are bound together under God's Word at the Lord's Table together.⁸² In short, the pain and anger, the conflict and rupturing that exists in our Baptist body, this is the raw material of resurrection. All of us are invited to the Lord's table, to confess our mutual isolation from God and one another. In the awkwardness, the frustration, the godly sorrow, the over confidence in our social or cultural traditions are judged as inadequate boundaries to separate us from the love of God in Christ. Some of us may indeed be apostate, having betrayed or deserted Christ (like all the disciples⁸³), and Jesus serves us all bread and wine. Our faith and fellowship are mediated to us. There are boundaries set, but not by any of us. Christ alone is the boundary, the origin, the mediator and the goal of our faith. The new humanity within which He has birthed us will require us to share His life alongside those who we, unfathomably, are called into fellowship with. Anything else is incomprehensible and a truly unbiblical envisioning of the Gospel.

As Baptists Together, who hold to the lordship of Christ, as we discern his way in the Scriptures, we are bound together within our mutual isolation, as a witness to the God who, through the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Jesus, overcomes that sinful solidarity, and is making all things new. Rather than fighting our own corners and arriving at a theological or ethical segregation, we should be genuine nonconformists, and refuse the inclination towards division and the heart turned in on itself. Yet, critically, as Bonhoeffer shows, we do not overcome our temptation to divide from within ourselves. We do not necessarily depend on our self-secured institutions of common ground. We overcome our sin by being overcome through Christ's vicarious representative action for and with us all. Thus, we are nothing other than 'pilgrims and companions, committed to the way of Christ, faithful to the call of Christ, discerning the mind of Christ, offering the welcome of Christ, growing in the likeness of Christ, engaging in the mission of Christ in the world that belongs to Christ.'⁸⁴ Anything else is inhumanity. We should not

⁸² 'The reality of Christ's presence at the Supper through the means of bread and wine may be received and appropriated by faith, but *this reality cannot ultimately be dependent upon faith; it is ultimately dependent upon the determination and promise of God.*' Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 165, emphasis mine. Bonhoeffer claims, 'By his Word, God has bound himself to the sacrament, that is, Jesus Christ is one who is bound by the sacrament. The God-human Jesus Christ is wholly present in the sacrament.' *DBWE* 12, 319. He is not interested in *how* the presence of Christ in bread and wine happens, but *who* it is happening in and through. *DBWE* 12, 323.

⁸³ Mk 14:50.

⁸⁴ 'The Dream,' *The Order for Baptist Ministry*, accessed 16 October 2022. <https://www.orderforbaptistministry.co.uk/the-dream/>.

betray our moral or theological sensibilities as nonconformists, and yet there is arguably nothing more radically nonconformist today than resisting the polarisation of tribes, and instead, associating as a disparate group of isolated individuals witnessing to God's merciful judgment in Christ, who alone binds us together, instead of clinging to notions around commonality, spiritual like-mindedness, hermeneutical uniformity or ethico-cultural and moral hegemony. As I said, earlier, I do not intend to solve the predicament at hand regarding MR rules for our union. Rather, I want to encourage us all to look beyond our own horizons and recognise that Christ confronts us in those who are different, who are lined up on the other sides of the debate, and he calls us to repent and believe the good news.

Since this article was peer reviewed, I have participated in one of the regional listening days that was offered by the South West Baptist Association. I found this whole day, organised by James Henley and Chris Fry, to be deeply irenic and peaceful. I was struck by the sense many people had that it was okay to not have a fixed position on this issue. I was also struck that there were others there who had themselves settled in a point of view, but who really appreciated being able to convey that in a space that welcomed them. What made the day prophetic in my mind, was that we shared the Lord's Supper at the end. We had cried, we had listened, we had all spoken, and those who had felt attacked elsewhere went away conscious that they are a part of the body. May the Spirit of Christ guide us in unity, truth and love.

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The 1873 Declaration of Principle and the Downgrade Controversy

Jeff Jacobson

A significant shift occurred in 1873 altering the basis on which British Particular Baptists associated. For over 200 years, this group of Nonconformists had an explicitly stated shared theology, often, but not entirely, in the form of lengthy confessions of faith. When the Baptist Union (BU) was formally reconstituted in 1832 (after an unsuccessful beginning in 1813), the basis was certainly minimalistic stating that they held to, ‘sentiments usually denominated evangelical.’¹ However, with the adoption of a new constitution in 1873, the foundation of association was no longer theological, but a statement espousing two Baptist principles, called the Declaration of Principle (DoP). Fourteen years after its adoption it play an important part in laying the groundwork for one of the most contentious times in BU history — the Downgrade Controversy (Downgrade).

In the years leading up to 1873, there was growing pressure on the BU to take a leading role in the national life of Baptist churches.² It was hoped that by reorganising the BU, several independent societies, such as the British and Irish Home Mission, the Building Fund, and others, could be brought under a single entity. The subsequent changes ‘reduc[ed] the disjointed parts of the denomination,’ and had a very positive impact on a Baptist identity shared across the country.³

Constitutional Revision

In 1871, Rev. Charles Stovel⁴ was given the role of chair of the *Subcommittee for Revision of the Constitution*, likely due to his experience of amending the constitution of the Baptist Missionary Society in the 1860s. The process of

¹ The BU was first formed in 1813, with the theological basis being a commitment to Calvinistic and trinitarian doctrines.

² Douglas Sparkes, *The Constitutions of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 11.

³ Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History* (London: Baptist Union, 1959), 112.

⁴ Charles Stovel (1799-1883) was pastor of Little Prescott Street, London, which became Commercial Street Baptist Church from 1832 to 1868. He was a long-serving secretary of the Baptist Building Fund. He was President of the Baptist Union in 1874.

revising the BU constitution took several meetings, spanning over 18 months. In February 1872, with only three members of the subcommittee present, Stovel 'enquired if the Subcommittee were ready to admit (into the Constitution) a Declaration of Faith.'⁵ However, 'the Subcommittee thought it unadvisable.' This event was described by the authors of *Something to Declare* as:

An important debate on the question of whether or not there should be a 'Confession of Faith.' Although the convenor of the committee required to revise the Constitution argued for such a Confession the membership as a whole did not agree.⁶

However, Payne offers a slightly different interpretation of the minutes:

... the alteration of the basis is said to have been due mainly to the insistence of Charles Stovel. The reference to "evangelical sentiments" was removed and in its place there was substituted this Declaration of Principle... The dropping of the older phrase caused regrets in certain quarters and awakened suspicions which, fourteen years later, at the time of the Down Grade controversy, bore unfortunate fruit.⁷

As the Minute Book is the sole record of this event, and only provides minimal information beyond the agenda item, it is impossible to know conclusively the nature of this discussion. Certainly, Stovel suggested a change of basis from the 1832 constitution, but how his proposed 'Declaration of Faith' differed from what the subcommittee eventually adopted (the DoP) is impossible to tell, but there certainly would have been a difference as his suggestion was thought to be unadvisable. Whilst the authors of *Something to Declare* believe that Stovel argued for what amounted to a 'Confession of faith', in fact what he proposed was a Declaration of Faith, but what differences between the two can only be speculated.

Institution of the New Constitution

⁵ Constitution Subcommittee Feb. 20, 1872, Baptist Union of Great Britain & Ireland, 'Minute Book 1871-1877', D/BUGB, Angus Library.

⁶ Richard Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley, 1996), 19. The authors were the four Principals of the English Baptist Colleges: Paul Fiddes, Regent's Park College; Brian Haymes, Bristol Baptist College; Richard Kidd, Northern Baptist College; and Michael Quicke, Spurgeon's College.

⁷ Payne, *Baptist Union*, 109-10.

The following year, and after several more subcommittee meetings, Dr Underhill announced at the 1873 BU Autumnal Session that the new constitution had been ratified at the Council's Special Meeting that July. While the focus of this study is on the DoP section of the constitution, it is worth highlighting the beneficial contributions that the whole document made to Baptist life. Sparkes pointed out three specific contributions that were achieved.⁸ Firstly, the BU Annuity Fund was established in 1875⁹; in the following year an appeal began for this Fund, and by the close of the year, £52,000 had been pledged.¹⁰ John Briggs stated that while this may not appear to be visionary, it made the BU 'the centre of a real brotherhood.'¹¹ Secondly, the Union was able to fulfil a long-standing need for a full-time secretary and Dr Samuel Harris Booth resigned from his pastorate to fulfil the role. Thirdly, and most significantly, the new constitution, in part due to the DoP, enabled the 'formal amalgamation of the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists' in 1891.¹² There were already many General Baptists serving BU congregations, but the doctrineless DoP made possible this historic merger. While certain aspects of the constitution were questioned and debated in the *Freeman* and at the Assembly, there is no indication that the DoP was challenged or even acknowledged in any way. This may be because there was a consensus that the new DoP was an appropriate basis for the Union; alternatively, it may be that it went largely unnoticed. There is some evidence which suggests that it may be the latter.

While the new constitution aided organisational development, the inclusion of the DoP was not as insignificant as it first appeared. According to the American Baptist, Leon McBeth, 'some have found the seed of the [Downgrade] as early as 1873 when the [BU] modified its constitution away from a doctrinal to a more functional base.'¹³ This change of basis, Hayden contended, was founded upon 'Victorian individualism [that] dominated much Baptist thinking at this time. Doctrinal statements were unfashionable, and *Confessions* of the previous 250 years were set aside.'¹⁴ David Bebbington saw this departure from such documents during this era as being caused by Nonconformists' doctrinal convictions becoming overshadowed by other

⁸ Sparkes, *Constitutions of the Baptist Union*, 17.

⁹ William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists* (3rd Ed.; Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 76.

¹⁰ Payne, *Baptist Union*, 105.

¹¹ John H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 221.

¹² Sparkes, *Constitutions of the Baptist Union*, 17.

¹³ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 308.

¹⁴ Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage* (2nd Ed., Didcot: Baptist Union, 2005), 149.

concerns.¹⁵ The theological landscape was being shaped deeply by the New Learning, influenced by the Higher Biblical Criticism, Darwinism, and Romanticism.¹⁶ Mark Hopkins, in *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, argued in great detail how Baptists (and Congregationalists) sought to navigate the new theological landscape of liberalism, while their Unions were simultaneously developing into powerful institutions which needed to be founded upon a 'broad and loosely defined basis of communion.'¹⁷

As the new constitution removed reference to 'evangelical sentiments', there was, for the first time in Particular Baptist history, no clearly defined shared theology as the basis of associating. There was in its place a simple 'prohibition against any potential development of centralizing interference in the life of the local church.'¹⁸ The wisdom of adopting this statement has been questioned, especially in light of the Downgrade.¹⁹ However, as already stated, the DoP was, by all appearances, uncontentious at the time of adoption. Briggs has concluded, due to its uncontroversial nature of it, that the language of 'evangelical sentiment' was dispensed with not because it was under challenge but because it was so widely and comprehensively accepted by the body that its statement seemed unnecessary.²⁰ Although Briggs's assertion is likely correct broadly speaking, the changing theological landscape of the time precluded the possibility of establishing a universally accepted definition of an evangelical, which was a significant factor in the Downgrade.

Examination of the Declaration of Principle

The 1873 DoP read:

In this Union it is fully recognised that every church has liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ, and that the immersion of believers is the only Christian Baptism.

Such a short statement does not require extensive exegesis, but it is important to give it a brief examination. In adopting this as the basis of the BU, it is clear that there was minimal, or even perhaps no, doctrinal content – which, as noted previously, was a departure from the historical norm for Particular

¹⁵ David W. Bebbington, *Victorian Nonconformity* (Rev Ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 56.

¹⁶ Christopher W. Crocker, 'James Culross, C. H. Spurgeon and the Crisis of British Baptist Confessionalism, 1887-8: Part II, the Controversy', *Baptist Quarterly* 54.2 (April 2023): 100-101.

¹⁷ Mark Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation: Evangelical and Liberal Theologies in Victorian England* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 255.

¹⁸ Briggs, *English Baptists*, 219.

¹⁹ Briggs, *English Baptists*, 219

²⁰ Briggs, *English Baptists*, 219-20.

Baptists. The content of this DoP can largely be summed up as affirming congregationalist polity and the practice of Believers' Baptism. In terms of its congregationalism, the BU recognised that local churches were free from outside control. Each local congregation was at liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ. This term 'laws of Christ' was carried into the 1904 DoP and remains there today as 'His laws'.²¹ The use of this phrase was carried over from the 1835 BU constitution:

That a more general union of the Baptist churches throughout the United Kingdom is very desirable; it being **fully recognised that every** separate **Church**, has within itself, the power and authority to exercise all ecclesiastical discipline, rule and government, and to put in execution all **the laws of Christ** necessary to its own edification.²²

The similarities between these two statements are apparent, which is helpful for interpretive purposes. The term 'laws of Christ' is properly understood in the realm of 'ecclesiastical discipline, rule and government'. The recognised liberty of the local church is based upon a shared understanding of what a church ought to do. Namely, a local congregation should exercise church discipline, by interpreting the laws of Christ and ensuring the members are obedient to him, for the purpose of edification.

More recently, some have understood the term 'laws of Christ' to be synonymous with the entirety of the Scriptures. For instance, John Colwell believes that this term, unfortunately, perpetuates the naïve understanding that the Scriptures are simply a book of rules.²³ But the term 'laws of Christ', I contend, was not to be understood in this way in the nineteenth century (and perhaps the eighteenth century).²⁴ For nineteenth-century Nonconformists, it

²¹ In my forthcoming thesis, I analyse the historical evolution and use of the DoP in its current form, which was finalised in 1938. In one chapter, I attempt to provide a thorough assessment of the words and phrases contained within. 'The laws of Christ' or 'His laws' is in my opinion one of the most misunderstood phrases.

²² Sparkes, *Constitutions of the Baptist Union*, 9.

²³ John E. Colwell, 'Catholicity and Confessionalism: Responding to George Beasley-Murray on Unity and Distinctiveness', *Baptist Quarterly* 43.1 (January 2009): 17.

²⁴ The Longworth Churchbook, a collection of minutes from the Abingdon Association between 1652 and 1708, may contain the oldest use of this phrase by Baptists. These churches re-established their agreement as association in 1707. The fourth point of that document reads: "That each p[ar]ticular Church hath ye same rules to walk by which are those which Christ himself appointed ordained & is endued with equall power and authority for ye execution of **ye Laws of Christ** and the Admi[ni]stration of all ye Ordinances of the house of God and therefore no Church must (on that account) be esteemed Inferior or Subordinate to another neither may any

was specifically referring to the commands of Christ in the Gospels. One nineteenth-century instance of the use of this term was by the Congregationalist R.W. Dale, who wrote *Laws of Christ for Common Life*.²⁵ There Dale urges Christians to resist the drift towards adopting the ‘moral maxims’ of the age and to follow instead the clear and concrete commands of Christ. There are a few more examples of similar argumentation by nineteenth-century Nonconformists.²⁶ Therefore, at least historically the term ‘laws of Christ’ referred to the ethical teachings of Christ in the gospels which were to be concretely followed by church members, and the members would hold each other to account. The authors of *Something to Declare* write that ‘His laws’:

evidently refers to the teaching of Christ in the Gospels, yet the Christ revealed there does not appear to be teaching a new set of rules, but rather pointing his listeners towards the character of God his Father, and the demands that this holy, loving and just God laws upon us.²⁷

The Downgrade

One of the most significant controversies in Baptist history involves one of the most famous of all Baptists. In 1887 Charles Haddon Spurgeon²⁸ was concerned with the growing theological liberalism within Nonconformity. This era was marked by several factors contributing to this contentious time. During the nineteenth century, Romanticism emerged as an influential philosophical movement, having significant impact in England, especially from the late 1830s through to the 1850s.²⁹ This intellectual movement challenged the longstanding English empirical tradition, and fostered interest in modern historical studies, which in turn influenced Biblical studies. Concurrently, and certainly not independent from Romanticism, the rise of liberal theology was impacting British Christianity, including Nonconformity. Higher Biblical Criticism and Darwinism were perceived as a threat by Evangelicals, which

Church or many of them together pretend to any Superiority or to exercise any authority or Domination over another.” See Larry J. Kreitzer, *The Longworth Churchbook, 1652-1708* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2020), 34.

²⁵ R. W. Dale, *Laws of Christ for Common Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1884).

²⁶ Joseph Tyso, *Church Discipline or An Abstract of the Laws of Christ* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1836); Joseph Turnbull, *The Laws of Christ: Being a Complete Digest of All the Precepts Contained in the New Testament with Devout Meditations on Each Topic of Duty* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1832).

²⁷ Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare*, 32-33.

²⁸ Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) was the most well-known Baptist figure in the nineteenth century. He served as a minister at New Park Street Chapel, later known as the Metropolitan Tabernacle, from 1854 until 1892. In 1887 Spurgeon resigned from the Baptist Union due to the Downgrade Controversy.

²⁹ Hopkins, *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation*, 8.

was seen as undermining the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture, a central component of Evangelical theology. In Bebbington's analysis of this time, he notes several theological challenges faced by Evangelicals. Some Nonconformists rejected the permanence of any doctrine; the possibility of miracles was denied, alternatives to the plenary inspiration of Scripture were offered, and the understanding of hell was significantly altered, if not rejected. Thus, historically central theological elements of Evangelicalism were being questioned.³⁰ By the latter years of the nineteenth century, this movement had had significant sway on Nonconformist churches, causing alarm to some, and most significantly to C. H. Spurgeon.

The ensuing controversy gained its name from two articles published in *The Sword and Trowel* by an unsigned author in March and April 1887, both titled 'The Down Grade'. Whilst Spurgeon did not pen these, he endorsed their conclusions that Nonconformist ministers were drifting away from historical Christian orthodoxy. The once commonly held doctrines were not so commonly held. With the publication of these articles, a lack of trust arose, leading some Baptists to be worried about the theological direction of the BU. Others were furious with Spurgeon as he levelled accusations without any substantiated proof or even naming ministers he suspected. In the midst of this dispute, Spurgeon resigned from the BU, further infuriating many. While he declared that he was concerned about fundamental theological issues, he did not elaborate on what or whom he suspected. This put the Council in a difficult position; while Spurgeon accused no one in particular, his worldwide popularity caused many to give him the benefit of the doubt, casting suspicion on all. The BU Council could do little to address Spurgeon's concerns if he refused to name names, so they urged him to do so. Spurgeon, however, thought it was pointless to provide them because the DoP provided no avenue for settling doctrinal differences in the Union.

Hopkins has argued that Spurgeon's main purpose was protesting the direction of the Union rather than reform.³¹ Whilst I agree that Hopkins is correct, Spurgeon did hope that the BU would reform its basis of faith away from the DoP to something more akin to the Evangelical Alliance (EA) statement of faith. Recently published correspondence between Spurgeon and James Culross during this period demonstrates that Spurgeon believed Baptists were

³⁰ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 144-45.

³¹ Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, 193.

and should have continued to be confessional; I shall elaborate on this shortly.³²

In seeking to address this controversy, the Council was in a very precarious place, being comprised of Spurgeon critics, supporters and neutrals, jointly tasked with the responsibility of finding a way forward; this proved anything but simple. Some wanted to find a way for Spurgeon to rescind his resignation and come back into the fold. Others were glad he was gone and had, earlier in 1888, successfully convinced the Council to censure him for his accusations which were devoid of evidence. Spurgeon addressed the censure in *The Sword and the Trowel*:

The censure passed upon me by the Council of the [BU] will be weighed by the faithful, and estimated at its true value... I brought no charges before the members of the Council because they could only judge by their constitution, and that document lays down no doctrinal basis except the belief that “immersion of believers is the only Christian baptism.” Even the mention of evangelical sentiments has been cut out from their printed program. No one can be heterodox under this constitution, less he should forswear his baptism.

When language is used rather to conceal a purpose than to express it, it becomes fearfully doubtful whether any form of doctrine can be so worded as to be of the slightest use. Nevertheless, I would like all Christendom to know that all I asked of the Union is that it be formed on a Scriptural basis; and that I never sought to intrude upon it any Calvinistic or other personal creed, but only that form of belief which has been accepted for many years by the Evangelical Alliance, which includes members of well-nigh all Christian communities.³³

The Council met to discuss how they ought to respond. Joseph Angus³⁴ had hoped to convince Spurgeon to re-join, by re-establishing an evangelical basis of the BU through a declaration. He had prepared his own which was proposed to the Council. However, as the minutes of that meeting reveal,

³² Christopher W. Crocker, 'James Culross, C. H. Spurgeon and the Crisis of British Baptist Confessionalism, 1887-8: Part I, the Letters', *Baptist Quarterly* 53.4 (October 2022): 179-91.

³³ C. H. Spurgeon, 'The Baptist Union Censure', *Sword and Trowel*, February 1888.

³⁴ Joseph Angus (1816–1902) pastored New Park Street from 1837 to 1839 before joining the Baptist Missionary Society, first as a co-secretary, then as sole secretary from 1840 to 1850. He was named principal of Stepney College in London, which later became Regent's Park College, and served from 1850 to 1893. In 1865 he was elected President of the Baptist Union.

adopting this statement was not a straightforward occasion.³⁵ The transcript contains speeches made by Council members, which is of great importance in understanding the role the basis of the Union played at this time. Angus proposed two Explanatory Declarations that he had hoped would bring the controversy to an end.³⁶ The first acknowledged the uneasiness produced by the controversy, and then reaffirmed the Union's primary object:

To extend brotherly love and union among those Baptist ministers and Churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated Evangelical, and to promote unity of exertion in whatever may best serve the cause of Christ in general, and the influence of the Baptist denomination in particular.

It went on to affirm the practice of Believers' Baptism, and that the Union is 'an association of Churches and Ministers professing not only to believe the facts and doctrines of the Gospel, but to have undergone the spiritual change expressed or implied in them.' The second section listed the commonly believed facts and doctrines by those within the Union, but also stated that these were 'not intended to control belief or restrict inquiry.' The purpose of listing the doctrines was to demonstrate a shared theology of a broadly evangelical nature, which would communicate to those outside the Union that the ministers and churches held orthodox Christian beliefs.

Richard Glover³⁷ was the first to object as he believed such a document would, despite Angus' wording, amount to a creed. Additionally, he believed that this would be ceding ground to Spurgeon by tacitly acknowledging his accusations and by embracing his proposed solution of a basis of faith comprised of doctrine.³⁸ In response to Glover, Angus made a remarkable confession:

In the Union report... there is now no statement whatever as to our beliefs, beyond the two points of Congregationalism and believers' immersion. For forty years we did what the Baptist Union of Scotland does, and what our London Baptist Association does – we described

³⁵ A typed manuscript of this council meeting can be found in the Downgrade Controversy Archive held at The Angus Library.

³⁶ 'Uncorrected Typed Transcript of Report on BU Meeting' (February 21, 1888), 4-5, Downgrade 4/3, Angus Library.

³⁷ Richard Glover (1837-1919) from 1861 until 1869 pastored at Blackfriars Street in Glasgow. From 1869 until 1911, he served as pastor of the newly established Tyndale Baptist Church in Bristol. From 1873 until his death he was the secretary of Bristol Baptist College. He was an avid supporter of the Baptist Missionary Society throughout his ministry and came close to serving in India. He was President of the Baptist Union in 1884.

³⁸ 'Uncorrected Typed Transcript of Report on BU Meeting', 7.

ourselves as holding sentiments usually known as Evangelical. That description continued for forty years. There was besides a constitution – affirming the independency of the Churches and believers’ baptism. It was then, in 1873, decided to introduce the clause that now stands there; which modified the clause in Baptism. The clause of Evangelical sentiment was omitted. It was felt that baptism by immersion was the only baptism of Scripture. During the whole time the Evangelical character of the Union has remained, but during the last fourteen years all reference in the Constitution to Evangelical sentiment has ceased. During those years our Evangelical work has grown, and has been marked as before, and our publications have been eminently evangelical, but the definition of what we believe has disappeared. That was Mr Spurgeon’s first statement, and so far as the formal omission of these phrases is concerned, it is [correct].³⁹ When I first heard that statement, I could scarcely believe it, but I went into the facts and it is exactly as he says. Our only statement is that we hold Congregationalism and believers’ baptism.⁴⁰

In light of this, it appears that until Spurgeon highlighted the fact, Angus had been unaware that the Union had omitted from its constitution the phrase ‘sentiments usually denominated evangelical’. Angus was a leading Baptist at this time, he had been President of the Union in 1865, and he was principal of a Baptist College for over 40 years. At the time he was described as ‘one of the most eminent public men of the Baptist faith in the United Kingdom.’⁴¹ Yet even he was unaware of the DoP. This suggests that it had very little use in the life of the denomination for the first fourteen years of its existence. Whilst this is perhaps a strong conclusion to take from a single person's ignorance, the DoP has previously been seemingly disregarded in other Baptist publications.⁴²

These differing views of its members on how to achieve denominational unity made it difficult for the Council to have a unified approach to quietening the Downgrade. The DoP was in no way a helpful guide. Some, like Angus, believed that the adoption of an evangelical declaration would demonstrate

³⁹ This transcript says, ‘it is time,’ which appears to be incorrect. I believe Joseph Angus was confirming the accuracy of Spurgeon's allegation, and therefore, I believe it is more likely he said ‘it is correct.’

⁴⁰ ‘Uncorrected Typed Transcript of Report on BU Meeting’, 8-9.

⁴¹ William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 37.

⁴² This claim is based on a thorough examination of the Freeman, which shows that no one commented on the DoP when the constitution was adopted in 1873, and it appears the first time it was mentioned in print was during the Downgrade.

evangelical unity. Others believed that the acceptance of a declaration would undermine the unity already present, exhibited by their joint evangelical endeavours. However, in the end, with the support of John Clifford, a strong opponent (yet friend) of Spurgeon, the Declaration was accepted by the majority. An amended version was adopted by Council with a vote of 35 in favour and 5 against. The Declaratory Statement read:

Whilst expressly disavowing and disallowing any powers to control belief, or to restrict enquiry, yet, in view of the uneasiness produced in the churches by recent discussions, and to show our agreement with one another, and with our fellow-Christians on the great truths of the Gospel, the Council deem it right to say that:

- A. Baptized into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, we have avowed repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—the very elements of a new life; as in the Supper we avow our union with one another, while partaking of the symbol of the body of our Lord, broken for us, and of the blood shed for the remission of sins. The Union, therefore, is an association of Churches and Ministers professing not only to believe the facts and doctrines of the Gospel, but to have undergone the spiritual change expressed or implied in them. This change is the fundamental principle of our church life.

- B. The following facts and doctrines are commonly believed by the churches of the Union:—
 - (1), The Divine Inspiration and Authority of the Holy Scripture as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice; and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it.
 - (2), The fallen and sinful state of man.
 - (3), The Deity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His Sacrificial and Mediatorial work.
 - (4), Justification by faith—a faith that works by love and produces holiness.
 - (5), The work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of sinners and in the sanctification of all who believe.
 - (6), The Resurrection; the Judgment at the last day, according to the words of our Lord in Matt. 25:46.⁴³

⁴³ W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (London: Kingsgate, 1908), 291-92.

The *Freeman* published a positive account of the Council meeting later that week. The author (who is unnamed, but who attended) was pleased that the Council, in adopting this Declaration, had resisted accepting any form of a creed, but was able to declare a shared theology. The author was pleased that the Council while making concessions, certainly did not compromise its Baptist convictions.⁴⁴

Not all were convinced that this statement went far enough to address Spurgeon's concerns. Some in the London Baptist Association wanted their disapproval of the DoP to be heard by the BU. A Special Meeting was called to be held at Bloomsbury Chapel in March 1888 to discuss a proposal by Rev. Greenwood:

That, as the theological basis of the [BU] is very meagre, and permits the reception of all congregational Baptists, irrespective of their religious beliefs, this Association appeals to the executive of the Union to prepare a sound Evangelical basis for the Union, embracing all the essential truths believed amongst us, and to submit such a basis to the Assembly for approval.⁴⁵

At the meeting, this proposal was debated for three hours and was eventually lost. However, a counterproposal was offered and accepted:

That it is undesirable that this Association, which has hitherto been characterised by such useful work, should interfere in matters upon which the opinion of its members is divided, and the discussion of which would be more appropriate in the Assembly of the [BU] than in the Association.⁴⁶

While the Downgrade caused significant discord within the denomination, it is surprising, given his popularity, that so few others followed Spurgeon's lead and left the Union. As a result of the dispute, it appears that just five congregations left the Union, and only thirteen individual members resigned.⁴⁷

Ernest Payne reflected on the Declaratory Statement from a subsequent generation and noted a few points. Firstly, he demonstrates the significant

⁴⁴ *The Freeman*, February 24, 1888, 117.

⁴⁵ *The Freeman*, March 23, 1888, 185.

⁴⁶ *The Freeman*, March 30, 1888, 203.

⁴⁷ Payne, *Baptist Union*, 144.

similarity between the EA statement of faith and the Council's statement.⁴⁸ This is what Spurgeon had desired, yet it failed to bring him back into the Union. What concerned Payne was the strange omission of any reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. This is despite the phrase in the first declaration stating that Baptism was to be done 'into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'. However, a trinitarian doctrine is not present in the second part of the Declaration, which lists commonly held facts and doctrines. This is certainly strange, and I believe this continues to be an oversight in the current basis of the BU.⁴⁹

The adoption of the 1873 constitution represented the beginning of a new era for British Baptists. It facilitated the merger of numerous formerly independent societies, resulting in considerable organisational progress. Furthermore, and most importantly, it facilitated the unification of the two dissenting denominations which shared the name *Baptist*. What had kept these two denominations apart historically was their differing doctrinal commitments. With doctrinal statements fading out of fashion during the Victorian era, their shared practices, particularly of Believers' Baptism and congregationalism, became the basis of their unification.

Shared Theology

The jettison of an explicitly stated shared theology, ushered in through the adoption of the DoP, altered the way in which Particular Baptists associated. However, its complete lack of doctrine was addressed in 1904 when it was rewritten under the leadership of J.H. Shakespeare, clearly indicating that the 1873 DoP was inadequate. Nevertheless, the role of a shared theology in the contemporary BU remains a source of contention which appears to be a by-product, at least in part, of the 1873 DoP.

In the recently published letters between Spurgeon and Culross,⁵⁰ the role of a shared theology for Baptists was debated. Culross, the principal of Bristol Baptist College and a friend of Spurgeon, was like many Baptists anti-creedal;

⁴⁸ Payne, *Baptist Union*, 140.

⁴⁹ I will be exploring this thought in greater detail in my thesis.

⁵⁰ James Culross (1824-1899) was a Scottish Baptist minister. His first three pastorates were in Scotland, Rothesay 1848 and 1849, Cupar Baptist Church in 1849, and Murray Place Baptist Church, Stirling from 1850 until 1870. He helped form the Scottish Baptist Association in 1856, which in 1869 became the Baptist Union of Scotland. He served as president of the Baptist Union of Scotland in 1870. He also pastored at Highbury Baptist Church, London from 1870 to 1878, and Adelaide Place Baptist Church, Glasgow from 1878 to 1883. In 1883 until 1896 he was principal of Bristol Baptist College. While principal, he pastored Pill Baptist Chapel from 1883-1892. He was president of the Baptist Union in 1887.

he was not against the notion of a shared evangelical theology, but he believed man-made statements did not accomplish that aim.⁵¹ Culross believed that as Baptists come to their ordinances (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) they were thus committing to the doctrine of the Trinity and the Lordship of Jesus Christ:

As Baptists—and this differentiates us from those who practise infant sprinkling—we make distinct and solemn profession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and take our place among His disciples—though the meaning of discipleship being fixed by Himself. In all that relates to Christian truth His authority is acknowledged to be supreme; His word is final. We express our belief in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We engage to live under Christ's rule, learning and observing all things whatsoever He has commanded. Taking our place at the Lord's table, 'we (1) own ourselves sinners; (2) we occupy our place as forgiven sinners; (3) we recognise that our forgiveness is due to the Saviour's 'shed blood.'⁵²

Culross thought that, while there would always be disagreement on lesser doctrines, the doctrines inherent to Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper (as he understood it) would safeguard the BU from unorthodoxy. Therefore, anyone who practised these ordinances would be 'right fundamentally'. Spurgeon, however, was not convinced and stated so in his reply, but Culross responded by expanding on his position in a subsequent letter:

... (without entering on the general question of creed-subscription) my contention is that the [BU] has already declared itself on such fundamental questions as the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—the unity of God—the death, resurrection, sovereign authority, and abiding presence with us of the Lord Jesus, —the avail of His atoning death—the forgiveness of sins—faith in Him as the 'condition' (for want of a better word) of salvation, while unbelief infers the Divine condemnation.⁵³

⁵¹ It should be noted that while the term 'man-made' is gender exclusive, it has been retained due to Baptists' historical use of it. Creeds and confessions were classified as man-made works, in contrast with Scripture, which was believed to be God-inspired.

⁵² Crocker, 'James Culross, C. H. Spurgeon and the Crisis of British Baptist Confessionalism, 1887-8: Part I', 182.

⁵³ Crocker, 'James Culross, C. H. Spurgeon and the Crisis of British Baptist Confessionalism, 1887-8: Part I', 187.

He does not explain where the Union has declared such things (and the 1888 Declaratory Statement had yet to be adopted), but Spurgeon asked Culross to put his theory to the test:

Will you, however, carry out your theory? I am indifferent as to method so long as the Union maintains evangelical truth. If a case is mentioned, in which a minister distinctly repudiates evangelical doctrine, will you exercise discipline on the ground that he belies his Baptism and the Supper? I am persuaded that the Council will not hear of it.⁵⁴

On the one hand, Spurgeon believed there should be an explicitly stated evangelical theology accepted by those who ministered within the Union, on the other hand, Culross believed an implicit evangelical theology was already shared by those within the Union. They both agreed on the importance of a shared evangelical theology for Baptist unity, but they differed significantly on how it was expressed. Spurgeon failed to convince many of his approach of adopting a statement of faith, while those like Culross won the day. The non-creedal and non-subscriptional Declaratory Statement of 1888 provided a clearer understanding of where most Baptists were theologically at that time in the Union. It maintained the liberty of local churches and ministers, whilst finding a way to state commonly shared evangelical doctrines – it was therefore not prescriptive, but a descriptive statement. While it did not convince or satisfy all, it did lower the temperature of the debate. However, the role of a shared theology continues to be unclear to this day. Reflecting on the history of the Union will show to a certain degree that Spurgeon's concerns regarding the DoP have proven well-founded, and most agree with his evaluation that 1873 document was inadequate – which led to a rewritten DoP at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Whilst the new Constitution of 1873 enabled many positive changes, it also planted the seed of one of the most trying times in Baptist history. In response, the Declaratory Statement was adopted by the Council in the hope of easing the concerns that many felt in light of Spurgeon's accusations. The statement, by and large, brought the controversy of that time to an end, although the effects were felt for generations.

⁵⁴ Crocker, James Culross, C. H. Spurgeon and the Crisis of British Baptist Confessionalism, 1887-8: Part I, 189.

Several Baptist historians over the past century have judged the first DoP to have been an untenable basis for the BU. The authors of *Something to Declare*, writing in 1996, state their agreement with Spurgeon that the DoP was an ‘inadequate statement’.⁵⁵ Briggs wrote, ‘the wisdom of such changes, given the changing theological climate, must be questioned’ in light of the Downgrade.⁵⁶ Payne also described this basis as a ‘very vague one’ which was an ‘important factor in the disputes of 1887-1888.’⁵⁷ He also stated that ‘the Constitution of the Baptist Union has never been very satisfactory from the theological standpoint, neither in 1832 nor 1872 (sic) nor today. But in practice it has worked fairly well.’⁵⁸ Hayden argued that this statement showed ‘slackness over doctrine and polity.’⁵⁹ I agree with these sentiments that the Union’s 1873 basis was fundamentally flawed. While the current DoP is more doctrinal (albeit limited), the role of a shared theology remains absent today. As a result, a fundamental part of the BU heritage has been marginalised rather than held simultaneously with other Baptist principles. For Spurgeon, the Downgrade stemmed from a lack of trust in the BU’s evangelical nature; ministers like Angus and Culross (and the majority of the Council) believed the Union was evangelical in practice and that a man-made statement was superfluous. The lack of trust, which Spurgeon believed was caused by the absence of a doctrinal document, has never been entirely resolved, and a brief analysis of BU’s history reveals turbulent moments that have questioned the BU’s historical evangelical basis. Although we are marking the 150th anniversary of this statement this year, it is more than just a historical document; the impact of it is still felt today.

Note on Contributor

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⁵⁵ Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare*, 31. However, the authors of that book, do believe that the current DoP is adequate see: Richard Kidd (ed.), *On the Way of Trust* (Oxford: Whitley, 1997), 26.

⁵⁶ Briggs, *English Baptists in the Nineteenth Century*, 219.

⁵⁷ Ernest A. Payne, *The Downgrade Controversy* (London: Baptist Church House, 1955), 10. Bristol Baptist College Archive (18855).

⁵⁸ Payne, *The Downgrade Controversy*, 73.

⁵⁹ Roger Hayden, ‘The Particular Baptist Confession 1689 and Baptists Today’, *Baptist Quarterly* 32.8 (October 1988): 407.

Baptists and the Bible in the Last 100 Years

Andy Goodliff

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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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.