

ISSN 2634-0275

Journal of Baptist Theology

in context



Issue 9 (2023)

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 revising the BU constitution took several meetings, spanning over 18 months.

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.

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

The following year, and after several more subcommittee meetings, Dr Underhill announced at the 1873 BU Autumnal Session that the new

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.

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 concerns.¹⁵ The theological landscape was being shaped deeply by the New

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.

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

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 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

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.

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 was specifically referring to the commands of Christ in the Gospels. One

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 endowed 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 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.

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 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

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.

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 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

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.

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.

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, 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

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.

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

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 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

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.

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 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:

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.

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

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

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

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 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

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.

⁴⁸ Payne, *Baptist Union*, 140.

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; 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

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.

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.

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

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:

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.

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.

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

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

‘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

Jeff Jacobson is minister of West Leigh Baptist Church, Leigh on Sea and currently completing a PhD with University of Aberdeen through Bristol Baptist College.

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 (1885).

⁵⁸ Payne, *The Downgrade Controversy*, 73.

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

Journal of Baptist Theology in Context

Editors

Andy Goodliff, Stephen Holmes, Sally Nelson and Simon Woodman

Editorial Board

John Colwell – Independent Scholar

Rob Ellis — Senior Research Fellow, Regent’s Park College, Oxford

Paul Goodliff — Independent Scholar

Jason Goroncy — Associate Professor in Systematic Theology, Whitley College, Victoria

Ruth Gouldbourne – Minister, Grove Lane Baptist Church, Cheadle

Steven Harmon — Associate Professor of Historical Theology, Gardner–Webb University, USA

Rosa Hunt — Co-Principal, South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff

Israel Olofinjana — Director, Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World

Glen Marshall — Co-Principal, Northern Baptist College, Manchester

Helen Paynter — Director, Centre for Bible and Violence, Bristol Baptist College

Joshua Searle — Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Theology, Estal Theological University, Germany

Lina Toth — Assistant Principal and Lecturer in Practical Theology, Scottish Baptist College

Aims

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

Submitting to Journal of Baptist Theology

We welcome submissions from Baptist pastor–theologians.

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

Cover Image

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