Journal of Baptist Theology
in context

FAITH

EVANGELISM

BAPTISM

JESUS
IS LORD

FREEDOM

FELLOWSHIP

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Editorial

Steve Holmes

Every Baptist who engages in theological research will, repeatedly, have to face the question 'why can't we just read the Bible?' Sometimes it will arise from our own research: as we reflect on research methodologies that cohere adequately with our Baptists commitments, this question will strike us with some force. Sometimes it comes from outside: a supportive but puzzled church member, perhaps, who cannot understand why we give so much time and effort to things that seem to them to be peripheral, or an angry controversialist, convinced that his (usually…) understanding of the Biblical teaching on this or that issue is self-evidently correct, dismissing every attempt to broaden the question.

It is a question we need to face—probably one we need to face repeatedly throughout our intellectual journey. The Baptist movement begins in principled rejection of ecumenical tradition on the basis of a reading of scripture; as we become inculturated into contemporary post-liberal academic theology, with its assertions and assumptions that the historic community gives weight to long-standing ecumenical principles, we will need to come back to that original genius repeatedly, to test ourselves against it, to check we have not been seduced into selling our birthright for a bowl of soup (or perhaps, given the nature of academic writing, of alphabet spaghetti…).

Readers of a certain sort of contemporary spirituality will probably have heard of Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'second naïveté', which seems to be regularly invoked in discussions of the journey of faith in later life, rather too often by people whose lack of engagement with Ricouer's writings is painfully obvious. It is not, in fact, an important term for Ricoeur (his uses of it number in single figures, even if we include the synonym 'post-critical naïveté', and it seems clear that he abandons it as inadequate as his thoughts develop in favour of terms like 'appropriation,' 'phronesis,' and 'narrative identity'), although there are serious arguments that it is a more important concept for his hermeneutical theory than this paucity of references would suggest.

Properly understood, however, it might be a useful lens to think about how we do Baptist theology.

Ricoeur's fundamental account of modernity proposes two central impulses, a 'willingness to listen', and a 'willingness to suspect'. There is, that is, in modernity an openness to new ideas, which will not be automatically dismissed as heretical or similar; at the same time (probably necessarily) there is a commitment to the examination and critique of ideas. His primary concern is a lack of balance between these two: those who exemplify the suspicious pole include Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; the phenomenologist of religion Gerhard van der Leeuw is his foremost example of the willingness to listen early on, replaced in the 1970s by Gadamer. It is probably not controversial to suggest that van der Leeuw does not have quite the cultural influence of the three he names as 'masters of suspicion,' and, whilst Gadamer remains significant within academic hermeneutics, he is still a relatively minor figure in the broader culture.

For Ricoeur, the overbearing supremacy of the critical willingness is most obvious in our religious reflection: as Matthew Arnold once did, looking out of a window at 'Dover Beach', he laments the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' as the 'sea of faith' recedes from the shores of our culture. Arnold had no solution other than human companionship; Ricoeur, by contrast, essays a way forward. Whatever we term it, there has to be some sort of reconstruction beyond criticism, or else we are left only with despair.

For Ricoeur, the engagement with criticism is a series of 'detours,' but they are necessary detours: how can we know that a particular route is a dead end unless we have travelled it? But Ricoeur invites us to believe—to have faith—that, having explored all the dead ends, we will discover that a relatively straight path was the right one all along—this is our second naïveté.

The three essays in this edition of the journal exemplify this approach. Mark Whiting takes us through the history of critical research on the psalms to invite us to re-engage with (what he terms) 'pre-critical' readings. Gunkel and Mowinckel ask questions that cannot be evaded—what if the best way to understand the psalter is like this?—but an intellectually serious engagement will lead us back to a

consideration of the canon and to christological readings. The critical detours are in fact dead ends—we have been far enough down them to know that—and, because we have investigated the alternative routes, we can return to more traditional readings, confident that we are not merely surrendering to a hegemony, but instead taking the only viable path left.

Philip Fellows examines Nigel Wright's use of tradition. Wright's work demands more serious attention than it has yet been given, and this is a welcome addition to the secondary literature. How should Baptists critically appropriate the tradition? Wright's implicit proposals are explored and largely welcomed in this essay, but the conclusion is we need to press further, and particularly to attend more to the tradition. We might paraphrase, 'a second naïveté is required'…

Alan Kerry takes us right back to the question, 'why can't we just read the Bible?' Is all our theological work in fact an improper attempt to 'know good and evil', and so to eat the forbidden fruit? Exegesis of Genesis suggests not, and a discriminating survey of recent research methods in theology gives substance to this claim. Ricoeur's 'first naïveté'—'blind tradition'—is rejected on solid exegetical grounds, but so are a series of simply critical approaches; what is needed is a critically informed method that nonetheless takes scripture (and dogma) seriously—a 'second naïveté'.

Rebaptising the Psalter

Mark J. Whiting

1. Introduction

This paper has the goal of making a contribution to the retrieval of the psalms in Baptist worship and devotion. It has two underpinning motivations. First, to prolong a conversation about Baptist biblical hermeneutics which began with a three-day meeting in January 2009 and resulted in the book, *The "Plainly Revealed" Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*.[1] Secondly, to address the lacuna in the place of the psalter in contemporary Baptist circles. The approach adopted here is to consider what it means to read the psalms (section 2), the nature of the psalmist encountered in the psalter (section 3), and some hermeneutical factors (section 4). This paper closes with some conclusions as to what a Baptist retrieval of the psalms might look like.

2. Reading the Psalter

2.1 Who 'reads' the Psalms?
Although Baptists have a firm commitment to the Bible the psalms do not play a uniform, or especially prominent, role in Baptist personal devotion or corporate worship today. Arguably the book of psalms had its greatest influence among Baptists through Spurgeon's remarkable expositions of the psalms, published over the course of twenty years in *The Sword and Trowel* and eventually made available as *The Treasury of David*.[2] The ups and downs of the psalms in Baptist

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[1] Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (editors), *The "Plainly Revealed" Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011).
[2] Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 6 volumes (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905). See also Ian Stackhouse, *Praying Psalms: A Personal Journey Through the Psalter* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2018) for a recent celebration of psalmody by a Baptist. The author has made a modest attempt at retrieving the penitential psalms for

circles is in stark contrast to their solid ubiquity in Christianity prior to the Reformation. More widely, the book of psalms has occupied a unique place in piety and theology throughout wider church history.[3] Key theologians, including Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin looked to the psalms for doctrine, instruction, and personal transformation. The 150 psalms have also exerted a huge influence on art, literature, liturgy, and sung worship over more than two millennia.[4] In some church traditions biblical psalms are the only permitted sung worship, an understanding of sung worship known as exclusive psalmody. In other traditions they have been given a central place, such as in the English choral tradition and the *Book of Common Prayer*.

One of the features that enables the psalms to occupy this special place is the ease with which a connection is established between text and 'reader'. The emotional dynamic that enables this was expressed well by Calvin who famously saw the psalter a providing 'An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul'.[5] He was building on the similar, and much earlier, insights of Athanasius.[6] More recently Walter Brueggemann explained this phenomenon with acute interpretive insight, in his typology of function paradigm.[7] Brueggemann argued that the twin poles of orientation and disorientation are shared by the psalmist and the contemporary reader.[8] In this way the gap between 'then' and 'now' is closed.[9] This ease of connection between text and modern reader is coherent with the early Baptist doctrine of the plain reading

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the wider church in Mark J. Whiting, *The Penitential Psalms Today: A Journey with Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143* (Cambridge: Grove, 2022).
[3] See, for example, William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
[4] This is surveyed extensively in Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, volumes 1 to 3, Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 2018 and 2022.
[5] John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Psalms*, Volume 1, James Anderson (translator) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) xxxvii.
[6] Athanasius, 'Letter to Marcellinus', 97–119 in *On the Incarnation*, A religious of CSMV (translator), (Crestwood: St. Vladmir's Seminary Press, 1998), 103.
[7] Walter Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function' in P. D. Miller (ed.), *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3–32.
[8] Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life', 6–9.
[9] Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life', 7.

of scripture. This is not to suggest that these ancient texts don't pose some challenges to the modern Christian reader, on the contrary, the resulting questioning and reflection is arguably beneficial for those imbibing them—i.e., there is ease of connection and substance to benefit from. This idea raises an important question as to whether this possibility has been eclipsed by contemporary Christian worship music, often criticised for its more limited emotional dynamic range and lack of deeper theological insight.

2.2 Reading redefined

The term 'reading' is rather one-dimensional for describing the rich interpretive and transformative process of someone engaging with the psalms as scripture.[10] Indeed, the contemporary solo and silent engagement with the Bible, which comes to mind, excludes some historically significant ways in which the psalter has been used and has functioned, for more than two millennia. Throughout this paper the word 'reading' should be understood in the broader sense outlined below.

Reading a psalm is a practice that predates the formation of the book of psalms found in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Scholars have long speculated on the origin of individual psalms and there is not space here to consider this in detail. The basic point that needs to be appreciated, however, is that individual psalms originate from a variety of different contexts. These include liturgical use in specific religious rites, temple worship, local community use, and as didactic literature. It is the case, however, that complete certitude regarding the creation of any one specific psalm is often obscured by the editing that they have undoubtedly undergone to bring them together as a purposeful collection.[11] On this basis, we can appreciate that the term 'reading' is anachronistic if used in its everyday contemporary sense. Using a specific psalm might originally have meant, for example, hearing

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[10] See, for example, Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 217–247.

[11] An especially insightful proposal for this shaping process is explored in Nancy deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).

spoken liturgy in a rite such as a king's coronation, singing hymns in the temple, reciting a prayer of healing, as well as reading with didactic intent. If these were some of the original uses, we can expect that there are times when psalms can, and indeed should, be used creatively, dramatically, and liturgically in similar ways today.[12] Until the aftermath of the Reformation, reading the psalter comprised a broad range of activities, and this pre-critical interpretation universally took place from a stance of faith and a context of praxis. The term reading herein refers to any intentional act of appropriating the meaning and significance of an individual psalm or the psalter in either an individual or corporate context.

During the Reformation the new-found impetus of *sola scriptura*, the impact of the printing press, and the rise of the university, all contributed to a complex process which led to a divergence in understanding of, on the one hand psalms as written texts, and on the other their use in the church. While this was inevitable, and not undesirable *per se*, at its most extreme scholarly study of the psalter was at odds with long-established interpretive paradigms. This is certainly true of the two dominant critical approaches that matured in the first seventy years, or so, of the 20th century. These two approaches are sketched below as a prelude to understanding the more recent growing scholarly consensus—a very different paradigm which is coherent with reading the psalms and the psalter in the church and in personal devotion.

2.3 A critical turn
Critical scholarship on the psalms, in the first half of the 20th century, was dominated by the work of the German Old Testament scholar Herman Gunkel.[13] His work is generally termed form criticism because

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[12] This is key part of Brueggemann's basis for his interpretive paradigm in which he pays serious attention to the psalms liturgically, devotionally, and pastorally, see Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life', 6.

[13] His two key works on the psalms, which have been translated into English, are Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, T. M. Horner (translator), (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) and Herman Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, completed by Joachim Begrich and translated by James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

of its privileging of a psalm's form within the interpretive process, with a view to understanding how it was originally used. Gunkel's goal was to understand the *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life) of each psalm, or the ideal psalm from which it originated. Gunkel's work was undoubtedly insightful, but it had the rather unhelpful consequence of fragmenting the psalter into individual psalms and, in some cases, dividing psalms into more than one composition. Gunkel went further than this in his pursuit of ideal psalm forms, proposing what is now an indefensible hypothesis that Jewish religion declined after a golden age in the 8th century BCE.[14] Gunkel identified many of the biblical psalms as late and religiously deficient compositions, because they mixed the various types he had proposed.[15] This led to the view that although psalmody started as cult worship, the later psalms originated outside the cult.[16] This typifies the potential of historical critical methods to eclipse scripture with something else, in this case hypothetical psalms rather than the psalter.[17]

The Norwegian scholar, Sigmund Mowinckel, built on Gunkel's work by considering a closer connection between biblical psalms and Temple worship. Where Gunkel privileged literary form and ancient context over more traditional interpretive approaches, Mowinckel made the ancient cultic context central to his scholarly interpretive paradigm. Mowinckel's approach is sometimes known as cult criticism because of the importance of not only Temple worship but its dependence on a hypothetical autumn cultic festival.[18] This and other rival hypothetical festivals, including that proposed by the Baptist scholar Aubrey Johnson, became something of a scholarly

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[14] Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 331–332.
[15] Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 330.
[16] Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 20.
[17] See John E. Colwell 'The Word of His Grace: What's so Distinctive about Scripture?' in Dare and Woodman, *Plainly Revealed*, 208.
[18] The reconstruction of this hypothetical festival supplies a framework which underpins much of his two-volume work: Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, volumes I and II (Oxford: Blackwells, 1962).

preoccupation in the middle of the 20th century.[19] The highly speculative nature of these approaches, and more recent scholarly developments, have meant that the privileging of such a paradigm has fallen into abeyance, but many of the broader insights are viewed as having ongoing value. Gunkel's work still provides the basic terminology for categorising the psalms today.

2.4 A canonical twist

Whatever the scholarly merits of this historical critical study of the psalms, it drove a wedge between study of the psalms in the academy and use of the psalter in gathered worship and personal devotion. Two more recent developments have been found to have greater promise at enabling scholarly rigour to cohere with ongoing psalm use. One of these, briefly mentioned above, was proposed by Brueggemann. The second is different in nature to Brueggemann's but is in no sense antagonistic to it. This approach's origin can be traced to Brevard Childs who proposed what is now termed canonical criticism as an attempt to address the sharp divide between modern critical approaches and understanding the Bible as scripture. In his study of the *Old Testament as Scripture* he argued that the book of psalms has a number of features that point to it being a literary whole that has been formed with intent.[20] Gerald Wilson, who studied for his PhD under Childs' supervision, examined the extrabiblical and biblical data that supports the hypothesis of purposeful editorial intent in a series of works.[21] The overarching principle of discernible editorial intent in the purposeful shaping of the psalter has been adopted as the dominant contemporary scholarly paradigm for current psalms research.[22]

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[19] The two most important rival hypotheses are proposed in Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*, second edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1962) and Kraus, H., *Worship in Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).

[20] Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979) 522–523.

[21] Gerald H. Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico: CA, Scholars Press, 1985).

[22] How such an approach might have taken place in the context of biblical Israel is laid out in deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning, passim*. A recent publication demonstrates the still growing consensus in terms of the tone and arguments proposed by its diverse contributors, see David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schmutzer (editors), *Reading the Psalms Theologically* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023).

If we accept that the psalter is shaped by its final editors, and that they did this purposefully, then it is necessary to consider the psalter as in some sense a literary and theological unity rather than a disparate hodgepodge of texts. While such notions of a complex editing process might trouble those of a more fundamentalist persuasion, Fiddes points out that the Baptist scholar H. Wheeler Robinson sees here the principle of the regenerate church worked out for the Old Testament prophetic books:

> when we abandon the literal view that each prophetic book is simply written by the named prophet and when we detect a whole process of transmitting oracles, commenting on them and adding new ones to them in succeeding years, then we find revealed the presence of a community of faithful people who are keeping a vision alive.[23]

By simple extension this idea applies to the editing of the psalms. This means that an understanding of individual psalms requires (in addition to reading them as individual compositions) attention to their wider literary context within the psalter. Such a paradigm also provides fertile ground for theological readings of the psalter and has a natural affinity with reading the psalms from a stance of faith.

3. The Psalmist

3.1 The righteous psalmist

Any attempt to take the psalter seriously as a purposeful collection gives rise to the possibility of reading the psalms from the perspective of a single author. This implied author reveals, time and again, that they consider themselves righteous. So prominent is this self-understanding that the psalmist is prone to being misunderstood. Rather than sharing the psalmist's commitment to being set apart by

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[23] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Prophecy, Corporate Personality, and Suffering: Some Themes and Methods in Baptist Old Testament Scholarship' in Dare and Woodman, *Plainly Revealed*, 79.

Yahweh (e.g., Psalm 4:3) or devotion to the law (e.g., Psalm 1:1–2) the modern reader might see the psalmist as self-righteous and legalistic. Such misconceptions about the psalmist, for misconceptions they most certainly are, will be considered at the end of this section.

Traditionally the righteous implied author was identified with King David as he was assumed to be the actual author of the book of psalms. This understanding is found in ancient literature and the New Testament. For example, according to The Psalms Scroll (11Q5) found at Qumran, David was the author of some 4,050 psalms.[24] At a similar time, the author of the letter of the Hebrews viewed David as the literal author of Psalm 95, a psalm which is not attributed to David in the Masoretic textual tradition, see Hebrews 4:7. Despite this widely held view, such a uniform conception of Davidic authorship is questioned by many features of the psalter itself, including clear allusions to the exile (e.g. Psalm 137:1), the psalm headings which point to other psalmists including the Korahites, Asaph, Heman the Ezrahite, etc., and the use of term 'of David', which heads some 72 psalms having a range of potential meanings, not just authorship. Most scholars today doubt whether many, if any, canonical psalms were penned by David. This does not alter the fact that the received text of 150 psalms implies a very close connection with David. This is evident in the widespread use of the Hebrew term translated as 'of David' in the MT (later versions of the book of psalms such as the Greek Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta have additional psalms identified as Davidic).[25] Furthermore, some psalms, termed biographical psalms, are intentionally linked to episodes in David's life: Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142. Even though there are good reasons to see these biographical headings as late, if we take the final form of the psalter seriously, we need to pay attention to them. Those that edited the psalter, as it took its final shape, saw David's life as an interpretive lens. More attention is given to these biographical headings in section 3.2 below.

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[24] William P. Brown, 'The Psalms: An Overview', 1–23 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* edited by William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.
[25] Brown, 'The Psalms: An Overview', 3.

Arguing that the psalter is Davidic might not seem to advance a compelling argument as to the righteousness of the psalmist. David's failures, such as adultery (2 Samuel 11:2–5) and arranging the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11:14–15), seem at odds with such a claim. This is due in part to a misconception of the psalmist's claim of righteousness as a statement of moral perfection. It also needs to be appreciated that there are distinct threads of editorial intent. Grant has shown that some psalms are concerned with the ideal Davidic king.[26] These are a subset of so-called royal psalms, 2, 18 and 118, that have been deliberately placed alongside the Torah psalms: Psalms 1, 19 and 119. This editorial intent provides justification for the tradition of reading the psalms with a Davidic lens. Our ancestors in the Middle-Ages saw beyond David's moral failure, and were inspired by his contrition and compunction, perceiving him as the ideal penitent.

The translators of the Septuagint, the Qumran community, and early Rabbinic Judaism all saw Psalm 1 as intentionally paired with Psalm 2, to provide an entry into the psalter.[27] These two psalms are linked in a number of ways by linguistic devices.[28] The uniqueness of both psalms 1 and 2 and their intentional unity at the start of the psalter indicates that their content is in some sense a hermeneutical key to the whole psalter.[29] The psalter's final shape was established well into the post-exilic period,[30] and consequently one emphasis is on portraying David

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[26] Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) *passim*.

[27] So, for example, Robert L. Cole, 'Psalms 1–2: The Psalter's Introduction', 183–195 in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul* edited by Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013) 184.

[28] Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

[29] So, Mark J Whiting, 'Psalms 1 and 2 as a Hermeneutical Lens for Reading the Psalter', *Evangelical Quarterly* 85 (2013): 246–262. See, however, David Willgren, 'Why Psalms 1–2 Are Not to Be Considered a Preface to the "Book" of Psalms', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130 (2018): 384–397.

[30] deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 19 argues that 'the Psalter achieved its "substantial" form sometime in the late Persian/early Greek period (late 4th century)',

redux—the future Davidic messiah. So, for example, although Psalm 2 might have had a much earlier life as a liturgical psalm used in a rite such as the king's coronation, in common with other such psalms, editorial intent in terms of minor editing and its placement invest it with this new perspective.

This pairing of these two psalms means that the 'blessed man' of Psalm 1 can be understood as the anointed king of Psalm 2. When we consider the combined attributes of this Davidic king, we see that re-reading this ideal as the risen Christ was the most natural of interpretive moves for the early Christians. It is therefore unsurprising that Psalm 2 is quoted seven times in the New Testament (Acts 4:25–26, 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; Revelation 2:26–27, 12:5, 19:15). The torah-delighting anointed king is an ideal figure and provides a basis for reading the psalter Davidically (in anticipation of the coming king) or Christologically.[31] Grant explores two other psalm groupings which build on this ideal figure: Psalms 18–21 and Psalms 118/119.[32] Christological readings after the Enlightenment have often been judged suspect by the academy but it can be argued that Baptist readings of the Bible are necessarily Christological due to 'the experiential and conversionist theology Baptists profess.'[33]

Psalm 2 makes it clear that the Davidic king is chosen by God as he is anointed to be ruler. David, the first of this line, was chosen by God when the previous king, Saul, had lost favour with God. David was chosen, according to the prophet Samuel, despite his outward appearance (a contrast to the tall handsome Saul, see 1 Samuel 9:2) and because of his good heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Although the historical David was not ideal on the outside this did not prevent him from wielding the power of a king. The eschatological David, anticipated in

but acknowledges that there was some ongoing fluidity regarding the order of Book IV and V until the 1st century CE.

[31] Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 41–56.

[32] Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 71–188.

[33] So, for example, Ian Birch, 'Baptists and Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Bible with Christ', in Dare and Woodman, *Plainly Revealed*, 171.

Psalm 2, exemplifies earthly power at its most potent; ready to conquer the nations that conspire against his God (Psalm 2:8).

The picture we have looked at thus far regarding the Davidic king of the psalter exemplifies what might be termed the David of faith. Such a portrait is incomplete, as alongside the promise of this righteous leader who can defy nations there is another. In the next section the suffering of the historical King David, the David of history, as portrayed in the psalter, is considered.

3.2 The suffering psalmist

When reading the psalter, it becomes apparent that the psalmist knows suffering, as well as blessing. Sometimes this spectrum of experience seems puzzling as the psalter moves from one pole to the other. This takes place frequently even within the same psalm. In terms of the Davidic lens the portrait painted in Psalms 1, 2, 18–21, 118 and 119, considered above, idealises the future David with little or no hint of trial or suffering. The biographical psalms do quite the opposite. There is, it might be said, a tension between the past David of history and the future David of faith. In Christological terms when Jesus is viewed as the psalmist, the psalms examined in section 3.1 exemplify a theology of glory consistent with the risen and ascended Christ, whilst the biographically headed psalms, and indeed many others, have a theology of suffering, or theology of the cross.[34] For example, these psalms testify that David, the psalmist:

1. Has many enemies (so, for example, 3:1; 7:1; 18:3, 17; 54:3; 56:1; 57:4; 59:2; 60:12; 142:3).
2. Is in need of deliverance (see 3:7; 7:6; 59:1; 60:5).
3. Faces, or has faced, death (so 18:4; 54:3; 56:13, 63:9).

It will be noted that Psalm 18 is simultaneously one of the groups considered in section 3.1 and one of the biographical psalms. This psalm is interesting in combing the two distinct Davidic threads.

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[34] The terms 'theology of glory' and 'theology of the cross' are used here without the intention of invoking Luther's polar choice between a *theologia gloriae* and a *theologia crucis*.

Importantly the psalter, as a whole, unites these two Davidic concerns. Read from a Christological perspective, the combination of the two poles takes on new significance. In addition, it should be noted that throughout the biographical psalms, where the psalmist consistently cries out in anguish, there is an incredibly strong sense of trust in Yahweh on the part of the psalmist. This is found in a range of metaphors that share a common semantic range implying protection, these include: a hand held shield (Psalms 3, 5 and 18), an angel of the Lord being encamped around the psalmist (Psalm 34), the walls of Jerusalem (Psalm 51), being in the house of God (Psalm 52), the concept of evil recoiling as off a shield (Psalm 54), refuge under Yahweh's wings (Psalm 57), being in a fortress or fortified city (Psalm 59 and 60), and the idea of refuge. The connection between the sufferings of the biblical prophets (in this case David), Christ and the reader was developed by the Baptist scholar H. Wheeler Robinson at length.[35]

3.3 The David of history and the David of faith

We have seen that the Davidic lens reveals a psalmist with a dual nature. On the one hand he is the King David of history, crying out to God in desperate need of deliverance. On the other hand, he is David redux, the King David of faith, the ideal king who has survived the trials and tribulations of the life of faith to return again—he is God's perfect anointed (for example, Psalms 2:2; 89:20 and 132:17), as well as God's metaphorical son (Psalm 2:7), who will bring about justice and subdue the nations (Psalms 2:9 and 110:1). The David of history, time-and-again, is seen to exemplify trust whatever his current experience. In many psalms he is also righteous and makes decisions that are right before God. Even when he has sinned, his hope in God indicates that he anticipates restoration and a fresh start as righteous, see Psalm 51 with attention to its heading. In a sense the righteousness and right choices of the psalmist explain this journey from the historical suffering David to the ideal vindicated future Davidic king.

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[35] H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955.

In a similar fashion when the psalmist is perceived as Jesus Christ we can read the biographical psalms and the individual laments as the words of Jesus who, had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58), had powerful enemies (e.g. Mark 14:55), was betrayed by his friends (Mark 14:18; 14:66–72), was tortured (Mark 15:16–19), and executed on a cross (e.g. Mark 15:27ff). Such a hermeneutical trajectory is even legitimised by Jesus's self-identification as he uses Psalm 22 while dying nailed to a cross (Mark 15:34). Unlike King David he did not sin, but like David his life of trust vindicated him and was the basis for understanding how a man who embodied a theology of the cross could rise again as proof of a theology of glory. In Jesus the Messiah, the promised Davidic king has appeared—the surprise is that he not only embodies the promise of glory, but this can only be perfected in suffering. We turn now to the fuller complexity of psalm interpretation; whereby various paradigms are explored, and the role of the reader is considered.

4. The Psalter and Hermeneutics

4.1 Fusing horizons and reader response

It was the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer who formalised the hermeneutical process of contemporary understanding of an ancient text as a fusion of horizons.[36] His illuminating idea is that a text is understood when there is a connection between two contexts (or horizons), ancient and contemporary, which leads to new hermeneutical position. This is very much the nature of Brueggemann's typology of function model of individual psalm interpretation—where the origin of a psalm in the context of orientation, disorientation, or reorientation maps organically to a contemporary experience of the same type.[37] It is helpful to consider how the various paradigms of understanding the psalms facilitate Gadamer's fusion of horizons and Brueggemann's connection between modern reader and the ancient text's function.

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[36] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method.* Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd Ed. Rev.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1989) 306–307; 374; 576–577 and *passim.*

[37] Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith', 7.

The form critical and cult critical methods, by their very nature, viewed individual psalms as a combination of idealised forms and expressions of hypothetical ancient contexts. This makes them legitimate approaches for understanding some aspects of the origin, nature, and function of ancient psalms. They do, however, have a tendency to put so much emphasis on the ancient text and original reconstructed context so as to build a barrier preventing appropriation of a psalm from a stance of faith. The canonical critical approach offers greater potential for such appropriation of the psalms because the gap between then and now is lessened. This approach is built on the inherent assumption that the editing of the book of psalms—the shaping of the psalter—was done from a perspective of faith. This not only facilitates fusion, in Gadamer's language, it is also compatible with the pre-critical approaches that church history so readily testifies to the spiritual value of other the centuries.

The Davidic and Christological approaches discussed above are, in origin, both pre-critical approaches. The former is, to an extent, one lens of the psalter's final editors, as illustrated above with reference to Grant's work on Psalms 1, 2, 18–21, 118 and 119. The latter approach originated from the former by virtue of a change in the horizon of some readers through exile and return. What is being suggested is that a Christian who follows the Jesus Christ who both suffered and rose again cannot help but read the psalter Christologically.[38] More specifically this will be a reading through the twin poles of his suffering and glorification. Augustine famously read the psalms with a hermeneutical approach that has become known as the *totus Christus*— the whole Christ—in which Christ is understood to be praying the whole psalter. In those parts that might be deemed messianic, such as Psalm 110, he prays as the glorified Christ, i.e., the head of the church. In contrast the laments and penitential psalms, such as Psalm 3 and Psalm 6 respectively, are prayed by the church, i.e., the body of Christ.[39] In this way the Christ event, the psalter, and human

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[38] So, for example, Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
[39] See Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 56–64 and *passim*.

experience each revolve around two poles: cross/suffering and glory/joy.

4.2 Reading legitimately

One, and it is only one, of the reasons why there exists a plurality of interpretive approaches for reading the psalter is that the reader's stance makes a fundamental difference. We can appreciate that someone worshipping in a Baptist church on Good Friday will read Psalm 22 through a different lens compared to an atheist professor conducting a philological study of the Hebrew text of Psalm 22. The former makes a reading dependent on the rule of faith,[40] and the latter with a 'scientific' agenda.

One of the challenges of a plurality of readings is that of legitimacy. This is especially acute for what can be termed reader response approaches. If the meaning comes, at least, in part from the reader is this not at the expense of the text? Both Brueggemann's approach and Gadamer's fusion of horizons can amount to forms of reader response criticism. Both recognise pragmatically what happens when the psalter is read. The words of the ancient author mediated through the Davidic story, the Christ event, and the reader's situation in life quicken the text and it is appropriated. Sometimes this process is said to reveal the elasticity of a psalm—it bends and stretches as the reader's experience connects current situation to ancient situation, or horizon to horizon.

In post-modern hermeneutics the question of the legitimacy of the many possible readings of a text is especially acute. Importantly, however, the earlier Modern quest for a single interpretive lens was problematic for quite different reasons. Psalm scholarship and devotional readings of the psalter have been blighted, more than for any other part of the Bible, by singular approaches that eclipse or at least exhibit hegemony over all others. This was especially the case with form critical and cult critical approaches. Multiple readings are

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[40] See Frances Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990) 45–65, for a helpful exploration of reading with the rule of faith as a presupposition.

part of the ancient fabric of Christian biblical interpretation. Soon after Christianity emerged from Judaism different schools of biblical interpretation emerged. Much has been made of the Alexandrian School's supposed preference for allegorical/figural interpretation over and against the Antiochene School's favouring of the literal interpretation. Though there is some truth in this distinction, the hermeneutical choices are more complex than this and both schools have elements of literal, moral, doctrinal, and figural interpretation.[41] The question of biblical interpretive legitimacy is complex, but surely, we must be committed to multiple, yet mutually coherent, readings.

We have seen that historical critical interpretation took the psalter and fragmented it, with the goal of getting either back to the original ideal psalms, or the situations in life that gave rise to them. In this sense rather than reading the psalter we have a process of reading something behind or before it. Such approaches are, of course, legitimate from a singular scholarly perspective. It is in this context that dissection can lead to new insights about ancient culture, the evolution of literature and language, and the history of religion, but as Hans Urs von Balthasar famously pointed out, in his criticism of the excesses of historical criticism: 'Anatomy can be practiced only on a dead body'.[42] While both form criticism and cult criticism can provide valuable insights they cannot be privileged when reading the psalter as scripture. The canonical approach, on the other hand, can be coherent with a stance of faith. This is because at its very heart it is concerned with the whole, rather than the parts, and how the whole was generated from a purposeful, i.e., a community faith-based process. In this way, a canonical approach legitimises a Davidic reading of the psalter.

As the canonical approach to the psalter has developed various interpreters have discerned a storyline within the fivefold structure of the psalter. Table 1 summarises three such proposals. The first proposal shown in the table is from Gerald Wilson.[43] As can be seen

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[41] See, for example, Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, *passim*.
[42] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. I: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Igantius Press, 1983) 31–32.
[43] Wilson, *Psalter*, 199–228.

he sees the shape of the psalter as centred on the failure of the Davidic line. Though other scholars who follow the textual support for an overarching narrative have tended to make more of the positive nature of Book V in terms of post-exilic restoration and/or eschatological expectation. In Table 1 deClaissé-Walford's proposal is shown and can be seen to be essentially a more fully worked-out narrative that generally coheres with Wilson's.[44] The final column of Table 1 shows an example of structure expressed in explicitly theological terms by Robertson.[45] All three interpreters honour Balthasar's warning and look to the whole of the psalter and its form. In this way all three read the whole book Davidically, but Robertson goes further and reads it Christologically. What is interesting is that they have all embraced a new critical method and relocated the psalter under a Davidic lens. In this way they achieve what earlier critical methods ignored—a recognition of the importance of David. In this way they cohere with pre-critical approaches that read the psalter Davidically and Christologically.

The step that Robertson makes, a Christological reading, is made possible only from a stance of faith, i.e., using a prior rule of faith. Such a theological reading is appropriate given the growing recognition that the hegemony of critical approaches has been broken, as interpreters 'of faith' have been bold enough to deny the hermeneutical mantra that the Bible must be read only like other literature. A church reading using the rule of faith can identify the future David as Jesus Christ. Reading with the rule of faith quickens the text.

Some caution regarding canonical criticism is needed. Like all critical methods, and by its very nature, it relies on proposing and defending new proposals and hypotheses. Over time new critical methods tend to become increasingly all encompassing. It is vital that the ongoing value

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[44] Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 21–38.
[45] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg: R&R Publishing, 2015).

of earlier critical methods is not lost, and that the limits of critical methods for use of the Bible as scripture is not forgotten.

Table 1. Three proposals regarding the narrative behind the five books of the psalter.

Books	Gerald Wilson (1985)	deClaissé-Walford *et al.* (2014)	O. Palmer Robertson (2015)
I (Psalms 1–41)	David's monarchy	A chronicle of the reigns of David and Solomon	Confrontation
II (Psalms 42–72)			Communication
III (Psalms 73–89)	The failure of the Davidic monarchy with David's descendants	The story of the divided kingdoms and their destruction	Devastation
IV (Psalms 90–106)	Yahweh, rather than David, reigns	The Babylonian Exile and the evolution of the community of faith	Maturation
V (Psalms 107–150)		A celebration of the community of faith's restoration	Consummation

Our examination of the psalter thus far has considered a variety of hermeneutical perspectives, each with their respective strengths and weaknesses. In summary:

1. There are those methods that privilege academic neutrality—which must put aside faith—these methods such as form criticism and cult criticism can transform our understanding of the psalms cognitively as new scientific understanding of

social setting, religious literature, and religion is hypothesised.[46] The premise of neutrality, however, risks undermining the very nature of psalms as the psalmists, editors of the psalter, the modern Christian reader and the church have an *a priori* commitment to the one who inspired the psalms. Nevertheless, appreciating that the psalms have a real past in personal devotion and gathered worship provides valuable insight into their recovery for today.

2. The recent canonical approach recognises the theological purpose of the psalter's redactors, which among other things made the psalter thoroughly Davidic. While such an approach could be conducted with scientific neutrality, this has not typically been the case. When adopted by scholars with Christian faith this approach offers a paradigm that can be termed theological interpretation. This approach can function as a helpful bridge between 1 (above) and 3 (below).

3. Since the writing of the New Testament there have been interpretive methods for reading the psalms that privilege Christian faith. These approaches were later developed and championed by the likes of Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin expect to find Christ in the psalter. Such approaches expect the possibility of the transformation of the reader's character and moral vision. They can, however, be problematic as there are limited controls on interpretation. Nevertheless, a nuanced appreciation of Davidic nature of the psalter, and its theologies of cross and glory, enable an understanding of the parallels between (i) the David of history to the human Jesus of Nazareth, and (ii) the David of faith to the glorified Christ.

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[46] This is not to say that they cannot inform faithful use of the psalms that might have further transformational potential, but rather that that such a move must be a distinct exercise requiring new presuppositions.

5. Conclusions

The above discussion enables some conclusions to be drawn. A number of these are not specifically Baptist in nature and this is neither a surprise nor undesirable:[47]

- The biblical psalms seem to have been eclipsed in worship by contemporary Christian music. Both are readily emotionally assimilated, but the psalms provide a richer emotional and theological framework.
- Reading the psalms should be a rich practice freed from the anachronism of quiet individualistic reading. The psalms should be celebrated in a variety of ways in gathered worship.
- Critical methods can offer insight into how the psalms can be used imaginatively and creatively.
- Critical methods need to be used with caution to avoid hypothetical reconstructions that detract from the psalms functioning as a means of grace.
- The canonical method invites connections with the otherwise pre-critical notion of the psalms as Davidic. Reading with a lens where David, or Christ, is the psalmist is coherent with this approach.
- The canonical method's understanding of the complex role for collecting and editing the psalms coheres with the Baptist notion of a regenerate community of faith.
- The suffering psalmist understood as both David and Christ provides a rich theological trajectory for the relationship between the testaments, as well as being profoundly instructive about the life of faith. This is a variation on Robinson's insights about the prophetic books.
- Hermeneutical engagement with the psalms is necessarily a process requiring multiple lenses. This is not at odds with the Baptist notion of the Bible being plainly revealed, as the rich

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[47] See Colwell, 'The Word of His Grace', 191 for a sensible path through wider hermeneutics and a caution regarding a distinct Baptist interpretive approach.

tapestry of interpretation concerns the transformative nature of the psalms rather than an explanation of salvation.

The final word will go to Bonhoeffer who, though clearly not a Baptist, shares the Baptist sensibility for the vital role of the community as the place for reading scripture. In this way reading the psalter becomes prayer:

> Who prays the Psalms? David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We—that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer. David, Christ, the church, I myself, and wherever we consider all of this together we recognise the wonderful way in which God teaches us to pray.[48]

Notes on Contributor

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[48] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970, 21.

The Authority of Tradition in the Work of Nigel G. Wright

Philip Fellows

Introduction

This article examines the role of tradition in the theology of Nigel G. Wright. There are several reasons that Wright's work deserves greater attention by the wider church than it has hitherto received, particularly as it relates to congregational theological discernment.

First, he held a position of enormous personal influence in the UK's fifth largest denomination[1] as Principal of Spurgeon's College, Baptist Union President, author, speaker, and prominent voice in the charismatic renewal of mainstream denominations.[2] Second, his work is intentionally pitched at bridging the gap between the academy and the local Church. In his systematic account of the Baptist vision of the church, *Free Church, Free State*, he explains that his 'declared goal is to shape the way Baptist Christians live out their lives today and in the future, and to offer an interpretation of Baptist identity for the generations to come'.[3] In that sense he was self-consciously writing to equip Free Churches to govern themselves in a way that is both theologically coherent and faithful to their own values.

Finally, the Baptist, or Free, conception of the church is already more significant than is often credited. Wright himself notes the many different tribes within Christianity (such as Pentecostals, New

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[1] The BUGB claims 1,875 churches and close to 100,000 members: *Baptist World Alliance* < https://www.baptistworld.org/member/baptist-union-of-great-britain/ > [accessed 20 July 2023].

[2] See, for example, Ian M Randall, 'Part of a Movement: Nigel Wright and Baptist life', in *Challenging to Change* edited by Pieter J. Lalleman (London: Spurgeon's College, 2009), 143-62.

[3] Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), xvi.

Churches, etc) which 'while not being denominationally Baptist, stem from the radical wing of the Reformation, and whatever the other differences, nonetheless broadly shares some or all of those values associated with believers' baptism, the autonomy of the local congregation and freedom of conscience'.[4] To this observation might be added the increasing trend in other denominations towards congregational autonomy and away from centralised ecclesial control (which we have seen in Anglicanism and even Roman Catholicism in recent years).[5] Baptist or Free Church ecclesiology might offer a glimpse of the promise and problems inherent in those trends.

This article will first consider Wright's view of the autonomy of the local congregation and his understanding of the role of tradition in limiting that autonomy. It will be argued that Wright views the local congregation as competent and free to determine its own doctrine and practise through its engagement with scripture without any formal external restraint. However, there are also certain exegetical moves and theological conclusions that Wright believes are not legitimately open to a Baptist Church. What is missing is an explanation of (a) how these constraints arise in the absence of any binding authority external to the congregation itself; or (b) how a local congregation can determine whether the question before it is one it has freedom to address without limitation or not. Both points need to be addressed to make the rest of Wright's model of congregational autonomy coherent and practically workable.

The difficulties with Wright's position will then be analysed before a solution is proposed. It will be argued that Wright's emphasis on the pneumatological underpinnings of the church, and the role he argues for the Spirit in leading local congregations, provide the tools needed

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[4] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, xxiii.
[5] In the US context, the term "Baptistification" was coined by Martin E. Marty to describe this phenomenon in his 1983 article, 'Baptistification Takes Over', *Christianity Today* (September,1983), 33-36. More recent observers have noted that the trend has accelerated since Marty's original work: Russell Moore, 'We Are All Baptists Now', *Christianity Today* 65.7 (October, 2021), 26. Wright noted that a similar trend had begun in Britain by the early 1990s, although he did not refer to Marty's argument or use his labels: Nigel G. Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), 96.

to construct a doctrine of tradition that is both consistent with the principal themes of Wright's thought and brings those themes a greater coherence. Finally, some practical implications for the way that local Free Churches govern themselves and take decisions will be suggested.[6]

Tradition, Scripture and the Autonomy of the Local Church

Throughout his work Wright is concerned to summarise and authentically present historic Baptist and Free conceptions of the relationship between scripture, tradition and autonomy in the life of the local church. In the following section, six propositions are identified that illustrate Wright's thought in these areas.

First, 'the authentic form of the church's life' is as a 'freely-choosing and disciplined community'.[7] In turn this implies that the local church or congregation is autonomous. The authority to interpret scripture and to determine what Christ requires of that particular community ultimately lies with local congregations, who exercise it free from formal external constraints.

Thus, Wright argues that 'believers together have a God-given competence to discern the way of Christ for their congregation and that free congregations cannot be compelled into conformity in matters by denominational groups or representatives'.[8]

This flows from the conviction 'that freedom in Christ is of the essence of Baptist identity: freedom from state control, freedom from ecclesiastical domination, freedom of religious expression and of the

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[6] Throughout, capitalised references to a Church, Baptist Church or Free Church are to a particular congregation or to the Baptist or Free Churches more generally. References to the wider universal church are uncapitalised.

[7] Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000)*,* 180.

[8] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 42-3.

informed conscience and yet always freedom within constraints, freedom in Christ, by Christ and for Christ, freedom and faithfulness'.[9]

The local Church is therefore 'competent to govern its affairs by discerning the mind of Christ. In this sense, each congregation is empowered to do what is necessary for its own life.'[10]

Second, scripture is the supreme rule for the church in both its doctrine and practice.

> The Scriptures have supreme authority for all matters of faith and conduct including church order. Of course, authority properly belongs to God and to Christ but is mediated by the Spirit through the primary and inescapable authority of Scripture. [11]

Together with much of classical Protestantism, therefore, Wright affirms the supreme authority of scripture. This authority is derived from the Bible's origins in the Spirit and itself justifies the primary place given to scripture in Baptist exegesis and practise.

In this sense, Baptists are, Wright argues, committed to a form of 'primitivism' or 'restorationism.' This is not, however, 'a legalistic attempt to reproduce the church of the first century but a free search for authoritative guidance and inspiration for responsible decisions the church must make in whatever time and culture it finds itself'.[12]

Third, however, scripture has to be interpreted. This complicates the question of its application within the local congregation and in the church more broadly.

While the text of scripture should be primary for Baptist or Free Churches, Wright concedes that:

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[9] Nigel G. Wright 'Sustaining Evangelical Identity: Faithfulness and Freedom in Denominational Life', in *Truth that Never Dies: The Dr. G. R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lectures* edited by Nigel G. Wright (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), 203-221 [220].
[10] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 116-7.
[11] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 42.
[12] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 42.

> even those who agree concerning a doctrine of Scripture
> might diverge widely over the material nature of its authority
> and what it actually teaches on any given topic, and even
> more about the significance of that teaching for the world of
> today. Believing in the Bible turns out to be more complex
> than might at first be imagined.[13]

For that reason, he accepts the inevitability and desirability of 'lesser
authorities . . . shaping the way [Scripture] is understood and applied'.[14]

Fourth, tradition is part of the inescapable context within which we
read scripture. Wright acknowledges that 'Scripture is never "alone."
Other forces shape our understanding'.[15] Therefore,

> Whenever present-day Christians take a Bible in their hands,
> sing a hymn, or recite the creed in worship, they are implicitly
> acknowledging the ways in which they are dependent on
> previous generations who handed the faith on to them in the
> first place. None of us invents the conversation as though
> from the beginning: we insert ourselves into one that has
> long preceded us.[16]

To some extent this observation is just a concession of reality: all
reading happens in a context and all readers are shaped by that
context. This context imposes an obligation to 'listen with humility to
the wisdom of our mothers and fathers in the faith.'[17]

Fifth, Wright posits that there are minimal doctrinal beliefs that are
necessary for a congregation to be considered a part of the church and
as preconditions for doing Christian theology. For example, Wright
argues that, however strong one's commitment to the principle of
semper reformanda, 'Christianity cannot be subject to limitless redefinition

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[13] Nigel G. Wright, *The Radical Evangelical: Seeking a Place to Stand* (London: SPCK, 1996), 44.
[14] Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 27.
[15] Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 46.
[16] Nigel G. Wright, *Vital Truth: The Convictions of the Christian Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 6.
[17] Wright, *Vital Truth*, 6.

without ceasing to be itself'.[18] He summarises this perspective by using the Reformation formula of 'the right proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments' as the ecclesial minimum while adding the idea of 'a covenanted community of disciples'.[19]

This necessarily raises the question of what readings of scripture, and what systematic theological conclusions drawn from those readings, are *a priori* binding on otherwise autonomous Churches and why. It is here that Wright's theological formulations begin to become less specific and consistent.

Sixth, ecumenical tradition binds the local Church, except when it doesn't. Throughout his writing, Wright has maintained a strong commitment to classical trinitarianism and to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in particular. Thus, for example, he argues that 'the fundamental, defining paradigm by which we interpret Christianity is the trinitarian doctrine of God. Where God is sincerely confessed as Father, Son and Spirit we find the apostolic faith and fellow believers'.[20] Later in the same work, Wright goes further:

> The primary debate in the Church of today is not between evangelicals and non-evangelicals but between those who hold fast to the trinitarian core of Christian faith and those who wish to depart from it.[21]

In *Free Church, Free State*, Wright clarifies this point. In his view Nicene Christology is a minimal requirement for church life.

> Jesus' teaching about two or three gathering in his name . . . means to do so intentionally and because of some quality of belief in him and devotion to him. These in their turn cannot be separated from the content of that belief, the doctrine of

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> Christ which underlies them and must be in accord with the apostolic testimony.[22]

> The definitive decisions over the essence of Christian belief about God were made at a series of 'ecumenical councils' in the first centuries of the church's life when the church remained relatively undivided.[23]

For Wright, therefore, a Free Church congregation cannot reject the orthodox doctrine of Christ and still be considered a legitimate part of the universal church or part of the Baptist tradition.[24] As Wright explains, '[t]he authority of the congregation today is also circumscribed by the authority of Scripture and the content of the faith that has been handed down to it'.[25]

While that part of the tradition cannot be rejected or reformed by a local congregation, other elements, in Wright's view, can. Wright explains that:

> Tradition is essentially good. But aberration is always a possibility and individual traditions need to be tested against their point of origin to see whether they are a legitimate unfolding of the apostolic witness or illegitimate deviations from it.[26]

Among Protestants this is unlikely, on its face, to be a controversial proposition. Even among Roman Catholics there is recognition that engagement with tradition needs to be critical and open to correction.[27] The questions it immediately poses are familiar ones, however: Why are any particular readings of scripture (and consequent

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[22] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 19.

[23] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 192.

[24] Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 39-40; Wright, *Vital Truth*, 6-7.

[25] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 130.

[26] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 1-2.

[27] See, for example, Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York, NY: Hawthorn, 1964), 44-46, 64-66.

dogmatic formulations) binding on congregations? If we grant that some are (and some are not), how do we tell which is which and why?

These are serious issues for any ecclesiology. However, because Baptist and Free Church theologians emphasise the responsibility of the local congregation to determine its own readings of scripture, and govern its own life, they are even more significant. The implications of our responses to these questions are deeply practical, affecting everything from the practice of the sacraments to ethical judgments and ecumenical/interfaith relationships.

Summary of the Problem and Its Implications

The great virtue of Wright's articulation of Baptist thought is its clarity and conviction. He explains the attractive qualities of a Free Church ecclesiology unapologetically and compellingly. However, he also lays bare its internal difficulties.

We are offered a vision of the church in which the local congregation is free to interpret scripture without constraint by external authorities. Yet that freedom is not absolute. It is limited in some sense by the existing content of the Christian faith (what we might describe as orthodoxy).

Wright's position must surely be correct. The radical *sola scriptura* tendencies within the Free Church world notwithstanding, there must be a limit to the acceptable ways a local church can interpret scripture if it is to be considered a part of the Christian church (and not, for example, Muslim, Mormon or Unitarian). After all, as Wright himself notes, 'The Christian community exists because of certain convictions that both define and motivate it'.[28] In turn this implies (a) that there is a form of authority binding the local church but external to it; and (b) that authority cannot itself derive from the local congregation's reading of scripture.[29]

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[28] Wright, *Vital Truth*, 9.
[29] Wright himself notes the tradition represents its own constraint on the local Church, *Free Church, Free State*, 130.

In other words, there must be some form of binding authority outside the local Church that defines the scope of its authority to read scripture and to delineate the outer limits of acceptable interpretation. Wright's work implicitly acknowledges all of this. Yet it does not help the practical theologian, or local congregation, to understand (a) how this authority arises; (b) how its content can be discerned; or (c) why it binds the congregation in the absence of an external ecclesial authority.

The explanation for some of this confusion lies in Baptist history itself. As Wright states, 'it helps to see that [the Baptist vision of the church] was above all a reaction against the institutional church which had over a period of centuries become an immensely powerful and domineering institution'.[30]

Baptist life, in Wright's conception, is rooted in dissent. That is, it takes what is already assumed (what other councils, theologians and ecclesial bodies have defined and argued for such as the ecumenical creeds, Christian ethics etc) and then points out certain flaws (such as an abuse of power, undue hierarchies, nominalism etc). This is an important task. Baptists and other Free Churches have contributed a huge amount to the global church, most notably in their commitment both to mission and equipping and discipling ordinary Christians and in their challenging other denominations to do the same. Indeed, Wright goes further, arguing that Western commitments to freedom of religion (and of conscience more broadly) are, at least in part, developments of the logic of Free Churches.[31]

Like all revolutionary or reforming movements, however, an ecclesiology rooted in dissent, and in particular in dissenting from existing structures of authority, encounters some significant problems. Chief among them is that at some point one has to explain why certain Christian readings of scripture that were accepted before the reform movement began (such as a Nicene Christology) should continue to be so in the absence of the structures that first adopted and sustained them. Unless that problem can be solved it will eventually undermine

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[30] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, xviii.
[31] For example, Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 207-10.

all assertions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy and, in so doing, destroy the coherence and integrity of the movement's claim to being a part of the historic Christian church at all.

Moreover, this is corrosive for confidence in Christian doctrine, for any given interpretation of scripture, and ultimately for mission. As Wright comments in the opening pages of *Vital Truth*, 'the church is in the business of converting men and women to Christ; but an unconvinced church will be an unconvincing church, unable to bring anybody to the point of decision'.[32] Or alternatively, in his reflections on the 1970s Christological controversy in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, '[n]o denomination can exist without a degree of latitude and tolerance in the views that its members may hold. But a movement that has no limits to what can be deemed acceptable is in danger of losing its identity and bringing about its own dissolution'.[33]

Wright himself does not explicitly address these questions (beyond the observation that it is impossible to escape our contexts entirely). We can, however, begin to use the ecclesiological concepts he does outline to develop an account of tradition that is consistent with his thought and yet of greater practical help to practitioners and congregations.

In particular, Wright's emphasis on the pneumatological underpinnings of the church, and the way the congregation takes decisions, offer the possibility of a third way between the *sola scriptura* reading associated with radical Protestant movements and reliance upon formal structures of ecclesial authority as guarantors and enforcers of orthodoxy. In the remainder of this article we will consider how such a model might arise, and how it relates in practice to the local Church's decision making and external relationships.

Pneumatological Ecclesiology

Throughout his work Wright has consistently affirmed the centrality of the Holy Spirit in constituting and guiding the church. He holds that the church is, at its core, a pneumatological phenomenon. Thus, for

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[32] Wright, *Vital Truth*, 4.
[33] Wright, 'Sustaining Evangelical Identity', 208.

example, in his PhD thesis, later published as *Disavowing Constantine*, Wright asserts that it is the Spirit who enables believers to participate 'in the fellowship and mission of the Triune God'. Moreover, it is the Spirit by whom 'believers are drawn into the communion of God's own being.' The church is therefore 'a confessing or believers' church constituted by the Spirit from those gathered into communion'.[34]

Moreover, the Spirit continues to lead and speak to the church as she seeks to live out her calling. In Wright's evangelical Baptist theology, therefore, the local Church meeting by which Baptist or Free Churches govern themselves in the absence of the episcopacy or some other trans-local authority structure are best understood as opportunities for discerning the will of the Spirit.

Thus, in *Challenge to Change*, Wright expresses the role of the Church meeting in this way:

> It is not the intention of church meetings to find out what the majority want and give it to them. We are concerned with 'the guidance of the Holy Spirit', 'the judgments of God' and 'the mind of Christ'. The question becomes for church meetings 'What does God want?' rather than 'What do we want?'[35]

Viewed in this way, congregational meetings to determine Free Church doctrine or practice are best understood as listening exercises in which the congregation seeks to hear what the Spirit is saying (either through scripture or one another). Moreover, it is the same Spirit speaking to each congregation, wherever and whenever they are located. Each congregation throughout Christian history is fundamentally engaged in the same exercise: listening for instruction from the one Spirit who interprets the scriptures he inspired and applies them to a particular context.[36]

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[34] Wright, *Disavowing Constantine*, 180.
[35] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 102.
[36] Wright, *Vital Truth*, 128. The use of masculine pronouns for the Holy Spirit has become contested. The rest of this article will follow Wright's own usage: for example,

In that sense, the local Church is autonomous only in the limited sense of freedom from human hierarchy; it remains under the rule of the same Spirit, discerning his mind and bound, in theory at least, to carry out his instruction. It is not an independent democracy but a theocracy. As Wright explains, this form of governance is 'accomplished most of all by the Spirit of God. The church exists to discern the mind of Christ, not the will of the majority'.[37]

It is the conviction that the Spirit is present and actively leading the congregation in and through Church meetings that allows Free Churches both to uphold the catholicity and unity of the church and underpins their claims to authority. As Wright comments, '[b]ecause Christ is there by his Spirit the congregation is empowered to govern its own affairs'.[38] Moreover, '[i]ts power to do this is a consequence of the church's catholicity because in each church the whole church, from which each local church draws its life, expresses itself. It has long been held that the local church is more than a lonely outpost of the "real" church: it is in itself a manifestation of the catholic church, the body of Christ and as such is qualified for this task'.[39]

To some extent, Wright is aware that this is an idealised picture. His conception of the pneumatological underpinnings of the Church meeting does not imply that any Church meeting – from the first Council of Nicaea to my own Baptist Church – is intrinsically infallible. In real life, Church meetings are meetings of fallen and fallible people. Wright acknowledged in *Challenge to Change* that:

> Over the years, with the development of the British constitution and the formalising of business procedures, there has been a parallel tendency in Baptist churches to conceive of decision-making along the lines of parliamentary democracy, that is to say, in terms of motions amendments, voting and majority rule. The result has been distortion. To

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Nigel Wright, *The Radical Kingdom: Restoration in Theory and Practice* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1986), 96.

[37] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 134.

[38] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 197.

[39] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 118-19.

> manipulate the rules and procedures of a meeting does not
> require spirituality but a certain cast of mind learned by those
> who know how to play power games…A shift is needed from
> concern with constitutional methods to consensus, that is,
> sensing together what the mind of the Lord might be for his
> church and pursuing this on the basis of common
> agreement.[40]

In a fallen and rebellious world (i.e., the world we actually inhabit), any given Church meeting might well, therefore, fail either to discern the mind of the Spirit accurately or to implement it faithfully. The Spirit's speech may be infallible but our hearing, and our willingness to obey him, is not.

Nevertheless, in Wright's mind, our discernment gains certainty, credibility and, ultimately, authority as it is shared with others and their testimony is added to ours. It is for this reason discernment is best undertaken in community with others, each of whom is also listening to the Spirit's lead.[41]

When we begin to synthesise some of these insights, a model emerges which accounts for Wright's commitment to the autonomy of the local Church, the supreme authority of scripture, and the subsidiary authority of tradition. Moreover, we can also offer some guidance to local congregations as they wrestle with issues of doctrine, mission and practice.

First, in this model the authority of tradition derives not from any ecclesial body but from the Spirit himself. The decisions of other church bodies have authority because the Spirit leads the church. Moreover, it is the same Spirit that constitutes and leads every church from first century Rome to twenty-first century Tehran. Each congregation has the same access to the Spirit and must seek to listen to him.

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[40] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 65.
[41] Nigel G, Wright*, God on the Inside: The Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture* (Oxford: BRF, 2006), 93-4.

The voices of other congregations who have listened to the Spirit are therefore obviously relevant to the discernment of the immediate congregation.[42] In turn this means that the history of Christian exegesis is relevant to the exegesis of present congregations precisely because it represents millennia of testimonies to how other believers heard the Spirit speak. This is what we call tradition. It is the recognition that the logic of the Baptist or Free conception of the Church meeting is equally applicable across history and geography.[43]

That tradition is fallible. However, this is not because the Spirit is fallible nor is it because tradition has its origin in human beings rather than God (as some Protestant polemics would suggest). Rather the tradition represents the infallible Spirit speaking to and through fallible human beings. Its authority is the Spirit's, and its fallibility is ours.

Yet, while the tradition is intrinsically fallible in its reception and transmission, nevertheless the stronger the ecumenical consensus about a piece of exegesis or a formulation of systematic theology, and the older the witnesses to that position, the less likely it is that the church has misheard what the Spirit is saying to her. Conversely the less scope there is for a congregation in the present legitimately to dissent from that proposition or exegesis.

Thus far we have argued that the centrality of pneumatology in Wright's conception of the church can allow us to develop and understanding of the binding nature and authority of tradition which is consistent with Wright's commitment to Free Church principles. This argument begins to resolve some of the tensions that subsist in Wright's work and which we noted above.

There remains, however, the question of how Wright's understanding of tradition, even developed in the way we have proposed, might work in practice. Thus, for example, is there a mechanism by which Wright envisages that the local congregation can access the wider tradition of

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[42] A point that is particularly relevant to Wright's treatment of association between congregations, considered below.
[43] The parallel with Chesterton's concept of the 'democracy of the dead' is striking: G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: William Clowes, 1934), 36.

the church? Moreover, what are the consequences of a congregation choosing to disregard the tradition in its doctrine and practice? Wright's work suggests that the answers to these questions lie in three directions: the role of the minister,[44] the congregation itself, and association between local Churches. We will examine each of these points in turn.

The Role of the Minister and the Congregation

First, Wright argues for the presence of ordained ministers as a link between the local congregation and the wider church. Within this model, the minister is ordained to a 'translocal' role as part of God's 'gifts to the wider church'.[45] The minister is therefore called to a ministry which 'is universal and acts as a stewardship of the Word and sacrament entrusted to and standing over the universal church'.[46] In that sense, the minister is themselves a means of the universal church and its tradition speaking and acting within the local congregation.

In parallel with this, the minister is also charged with 'a representative role in that they are mandated by the by the church to represent it to the wider church and to the wider community'.[47] The minister therefore faces in two directions: they bring the concerns and needs of the local congregation to the universal church and its tradition, and in turn speak the wisdom and tradition of the universal church into the life of the local congregation.

Such a role is not, Wright argues, absolutely necessary for a local congregation to thrive but is almost so:

> Ministries are vital for the *bene esse* of the church; for its *esse* they are *almost* necessary, but not quite absolutely… [the local congregation] is wise to seek the oversight of the translocal

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[44] Wright intentionally chooses the language of 'minister' to include different understandings of gifting and calling, including prophets, apostles, pastor-teachers, evangelists, *Free Church, Free State*, 166.

[45] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 165. Wright defends the language of ordination while defining it in a non-sacerdotal manner, *Free Church, Free State,* 170-1.

[46] *Free Church, Free State*, p.166.

[47] *Free Church, Free State*, p.171.

> ministries in order that they might have access to those gifts
> and people Christ bestows on the church for its growth into
> maturity and unity with the whole body of Christ.[48]

Wright believes that the Spirit acts in the life of the ordained minister, equipping and using them to serve in this way.[49]

The first means by which the local congregation ought to encounter the tradition of the church, therefore, is through her minister. Wright, however, goes beyond this to the responsibility of the congregation itself.

The specific role and responsibilities of the congregation are less developed in Wright's work. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which he regards it as a duty of the lay members of a congregation to understand and live in keeping with the Christian tradition and therefore to act and choose in accordance with it. Thus, for example, he argues that:

> [E]ssentially the tradition is not safeguarded *externally* by the
> act of laying on of hands from one generation to another but
> *internally* by faithfulness to the apostolic testimony; and that
> testimony is the property and responsibility not of ministers
> alone but of the 'household of God, which is the church of
> the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.[50]

In this, Wright is not diminishing the importance of properly trained ministers (as his commitment to theological education demonstrates). Rather he perceives that there is, within faithful congregations, a kind of lived understanding of the deep meaning of the Christian faith which comes not from specific training or ordination but rather the ordinary life of a disciple.

These represent two means by which a Church meeting can itself encounter the tradition of the church in its exegesis, doctrinal formulation and decision making. Its congregation will already have

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[48] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 173. Emphasis in the original.

[49] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 171.

[50] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 164-5. Emphasis in the original. The quote at the end is 1 Tim 3.15.

some form of intuitive grasp of the tradition by virtue of their own encounter with Christ. And it is the responsibility of her minister or ministers to explain and otherwise guide the congregation to read scripture and engage with its context in a way that is faithful to the consensus of the tradition.

The Role of Associations

There remains, however, a third mechanism of the local congregation encountering the voice of the Spirit in the tradition of the church. This comes through Wright's understanding of associations formed between congregations.[51]

It is here that we see the logic of Wright's implicit doctrine of tradition worked out more fully. As such it provides a helpful illustration and application of that doctrine in practice and is therefore worth examining with particular attention.

The Enduring Freedom of the Congregation

Wright begins his analysis by arguing, in terms that echo his description of the role of ordained ministers, that local congregations need to be open to the rest of the church if they are to operate properly. Thus, he claims that:

> It is debatable whether any church can be truly church if it does not give recognition and demonstrate 'universal openness' to other churches…The same theological logic that undergirds the local church works for the wider church. If it is the presence of Christ in the gathering congregation that renders it competent, then that same Christ is present in the wider communion of churches and lends to it also an authority and wisdom that need to be heeded…The *competence* of the congregation was never meant to be an *omnicompetence* which removes the need for interdependence. If openness to others is a fundamental condition of the *esse* of the church,

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[51] The fullest account of Wright's model of association is in *Free Church, Free State*, 182-202. This analysis will focus primarily on this account.

then supportive and co-operative fellowship certainly belong to the *bene esse* of the churches and the *plene esse* of the church will only be accomplished when all Christian congregations are working together in the bonds of the Spirit for the glory of God.[52]

Critically, this vision extends beyond Wright's own ecclesial context, requiring an openness to the truth contained within every legitimate expression of Christianity regardless of denominational, geographic or temporal boundaries.

When particular denominations take these four marks of the church and apply them exclusively to themselves…then they actually add to the failure of the church…The four 'marks of the church' are not yet fully true of any one part of the church. They cannot be said to be our present possession, except by way of anticipation and promise; but they do set the agenda for the church of the present time.[53]

Wright's argument then moves to consider the way that British Baptists have sought to relate to one another in networks and communions (often described using the label 'associations' and 'associating'). Wright explains that association:

protects the freedom of the local congregations from external compulsion and points to the essential insight: churches freely choose to relate to other congregations in order to express life together as the body of Christ more fully and for common purposes in the service of mission.[54]

This is a clear statement of the autonomy of the local congregation. It is free from external control. Within this view, the local congregation is not obliged to relate to any particular church or body and, even if it is corrected by another church or group of churches, it is under no obligation to accept that correction by virtue of its relationship to

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[52] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 183-4.
[53] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 186.
[54] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 186-7.

them. Through examining three 17th century Baptist confessions and articles of association Wright argues that:

> Churches, then, are to hold fellowship with each other for the purpose of mutual support and correction, but this must not be allowed to become the usurping of the freedoms or powers of any member church or the exercise of power by one church or groups of churches over another. What is envisaged is a free association of churches held together by mutual trust and moral authority.[55]

The association therefore has no formal power to bind the local congregation outside its moral authority and its ultimate sanction of withdrawing fellowship. It might be objected that, in the form of rebuke and excommunication, these are precisely the sanctions that any non-state church or para-church body can exercise over congregations, whether or not it exists within the Free Church tradition. Nevertheless, it reflects Wright's commitment to the freedom of the local congregation from state control and his sense that it is the local Church meeting that has the final say over its doctrine and practice. This autonomy can never, within the Free Church model, be finally devolved to another body or removed from the local congregation. The local association's role is to resource the congregation's decision making autonomy and mission, not to replace it.

The Limiting Power of Ecumenical Councils

Having offered a vision of associations as opportunities for relating and resourcing, which can never bind the local congregation, Wright then advances what, at first glance, appears to be a contradictory argument relating to synods and councils. He begins by arguing that:

> the local church is competent to govern its own affairs, but that it is not omnicompetent…The doctrine of the autonomy of the local church allows each congregation considerable scope for exercising conscientious judgment in the

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[55] Wright, *Free Church, Free State,* 188.

application of the gospel to its situation. Yet the gospel has a given-ness to it and so there is a limit: it is not up to individual churches or Christians to reinvent the faith that has been given. Even so, there are times when strategic and far-reaching judgments do need to be made and on which a great deal hangs…Here we are not in the sphere of individual choice but of the mind of the church, the *sensus fidelium*, the consensus of the faithful. Decisions of this magnitude cannot be made in the local congregation. They require the wisdom of the wider church as its representatives come together in synods and councils.[56]

There are, therefore, some decisions of external bodies that, by their nature, bind the local congregation and cannot legitimately be ignored or overruled. Wright offers the 'ecumenical councils' as an example:

The definitive decisions over the essence of Christian belief about God were made at a series of 'ecumenical councils' in the first centuries of the church's life when the church remained relatively undivided.[57]

Here Wright explicitly states that a local congregation is not free to reject the creeds formulated by the ecumenical councils. Moreover, this power to bind is directly linked to their ecumenical nature and the relative unity of the church at that time.[58]

Wright goes on to draw out this link further:

With growing division, the possibility of further such councils has gone, but in more partial ways the denominations and

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[56] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 191-2.
[57] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 192.
[58] Wright does not address the point that these were decisions made by bishops, operating within an explicitly episcopal system under the supervision (at least for some of the councils) of an emperor. Nor is he clear how many councils he believes to be definitive and therefore not open to question.

> sub-traditions of the church all have their ways of consulting together and seeking God's wisdom in their imperfect state.[59]

At this point Wright has offered a significant qualification to his doctrine of the autonomy and liberty of the local congregation. Associations of churches or congregations, freely entered into by a local congregation, will not normally bind it. Their decisions and support may be helpful, and even necessary in the life of the local church. Nevertheless, they do not constrain the Church's freedom.

There are, however, matters, particularly relating to doctrine, that the local congregation is not free to determine for itself. Here it should defer to the judgment of the wider church. The degree of deference required will depend upon the ecumenical acceptance of that judgment. Where, for example, the judgment was formulated by a body with widespread ecumenical participation and has been almost universally accepted over a prolonged period, it is, Wright argues, 'definitive.' The further it falls from this ideal, however, the greater the local congregation's scope for legitimate dissent.

This is precisely what we would expect if Wright's doctrine of tradition is grounded in his pneumatology in the way we argued for above, particularly if, as Wright argues, the 'same theological logic that undergirds the local church works for the wider church'.[60] It also explains why, in Wright's conception, the primary role of the associations is to resource the local Church.[61] Associations provide one way of the local congregation accessing the tradition of the wider church. But their judgments are valid only to the extent that they represent that tradition accurately and helpfully.

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[59] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 192.
[60] Wright, *Free Church, Free State,* 183.
[61] Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 189.

Conclusions

In practice this means that when a congregation is addressing a question of theology or practice as it pertains to their context, the history of Christian exegesis and doctrinal formulation on this point is vitally relevant and demands to be listened to with respect and a presumption of obedience when a consensus can be discerned. This can be encountered in three ways: through the minister charged with representing the universal church to the local congregation, through the Spirit-formed mind of the faithful congregation itself, and through the guidance and discipline of a wider association of Free Churches.

Such a proposition does not undermine the autonomy of the local congregation. Rather it acknowledges that the congregation can be independent of formal ecclesial authority precisely because, and only because, she submits to the voice of the Spirit and therefore seeks to hear what the Spirit is saying with humility and self-denial. It is fundamentally the posture of those who say 'not my will but yours be done'.

While such a model might be critiqued on the grounds that it is unworkable, a robustly understood commitment to association, classical theological education of ministers, and spiritual formation of the congregation mitigates these problems. Moreover, Wright would contend, the problems attendant on the Free Church model are preferable to those arising in the alternatives.[62]

This represents a development of Wright's evangelical theology but one which is consistent with the principles contained within it and is necessary to make his vision of autonomous congregations operating within the orthodox and catholic Christian tradition effective.

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[62] Wright has repeatedly considered the alternatives and explained why, despite its flaws, he nevertheless considers the Baptist understanding of the church the best available option. See, for example, *Challenge to Change*, 96-113, *Free Church, Free State*, 119-35.

To What Extent do Theological Research Methods Run the Danger of 'Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil'? (Gen 2 v 17)

Alan Kerry

Introduction

As an epigraph for *On The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin quoted from Francis Bacon;

> let no man out of a weak conceit of sobriety, or an ill-applied moderation, think or maintain, that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's work [...] but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficience in both.[63]

Since its publication, many have accused Darwin's *magnum opus* of committing the sin described in this essay's title. Certainly, both Bacon and Darwin seem to advocate a modernist viewpoint that there is no such thing as too much knowledge, and that scientific method should be enthusiastically embraced as the way of leading us from error into truth. Schleiermacher had earlier argued that theology itself should be regarded as a legitimate science within the academy, which resulted in theology subdividing into separate academic disciplines, resulting in the 'fourfold' of Bible, church history, dogmatics and practical theology. [64] But was all this optimism entirely healthy? Could theological enquiry actually be dangerous? To address this, we will begin by exegeting

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[63] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection*, 150th anniversary landmark ed. (London: Penguin, 2009), 6.

[64] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, 'Systematic Theology' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* edited by Bonnie J. McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 360-61.

Genesis 2:17 and then consider how different approaches to theological research might risk transgression, and how this can be guarded against.

Genesis 2:17

Although Genesis 2-3 is commonly read as a foundational text for doctrines of 'the fall', the explanation of evil and the origin of death, Walter Brueggemann suggests it is in fact none of these things, which instead come as Christian doctrines from Paul's exegesis in Romans 5:12-21, which in turn draws on later writings such as IV Ezra.[65] For Brueggemann, the Genesis text is less about offering explanations, and more about setting out the call 'to live in God's world, with God's other creatures, *on God's terms*' (his italics).[66] Furthermore, Paul's writing should not be read as systematic theology or theodicy, rather he is proclaiming good news.[67] Paul Goodliff does read Genesis 2-3 as describing a fall from innocence, but he sees this as analogous to child development, whereby at around six months old, cutting teeth and gaining mobility, she requires parents to impose boundaries and prohibitions.[68] Read in both of these ways, the prohibition of v17 is not to be seen as an arbitrary or wilful threat imposed by a despotic God who somehow delights in limiting human freedom, but as a further expression of grace towards his creatures, concerned for their well-being and flourishing.[69] To focus on the *prohibition* of the tree of knowledge is also to underplay the greater *permission* granted to Adam and Eve—only one tree in the garden is prohibited. Bonhoeffer agrees that pre-fall Adam sees only grace, not prohibition, in the relationship between limited creature and limitless creator.[70]

Nevertheless, the passage clearly serves as a warning of various kinds of harm which may arise from eating 'of the tree of the knowledge of

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[65] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 42.

[66] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 40.

[67] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 43.

[68] Paul Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face: A Pastoral and Theological Exploration of Shame* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 12.

[69] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 48.

[70] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3* translated by Douglas S. Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 87.

good and evil'. The exact meaning of the two trees in the garden is not
spelled out in the text, but it is clear that they represent the potential
for life and death. Bonnie Miller-McLemore points out that 'tree' has
been a powerful image across cultures, usually symbolising life and
unity, but sometimes having a dark side, as with the lynch tree of Billie
Holiday's *Strange Fruit*.[71]

Brueggemann suggests that the tree of life may refer to a royal wisdom
tradition which saw a king's appointed role as guarding the mysteries
of life and knowledge, as suggested in Proverbs 25:2-3.[72] The meaning
of the tree of knowledge is even less clear; it is not mentioned
elsewhere in scripture and 'nothing is explained' regarding its nature.[73]
This gap invites speculation, but such speculation may actually be the
very danger that the text is warning against! Webster distinguishes
between 'studiousness' and 'curiosity', the latter of which 'gives itself
promiscuously to whatever sources of fascination present themselves,
particularly if they are novel'.[74] Idly imagining what God might have
meant when he hasn't told us may lead to error in many forms.
Ultimately, the serpent persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by
arousing sceptical curiosity in her; 'Did God say…?'[75] Scepticism leads
to speculation which leads to hasty action without sufficient reflection;
this is a pertinent warning for those of us eager to embark on
theological research.

What is clear, for Brueggemann at least, is that the text 'is not a
counsel to obscurantism, as though knowing nothing is an act of
fidelity'.[76] If the text is challenging the royal wisdom tradition, then it
does so by challenging the equation of knowledge and power; perhaps
some 'modes of knowledge [come] at too high a cost' but it is not
suggesting that knowledge itself is bad.[77] Indeed in v19 Adam is

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[71] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand
Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 19.
[72] This would imply a late, possibly post-exilic date for the compiled Genesis text.
[73] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 45-6 and 51.
[74] John Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3
(2015): 26.
[75] Genesis 3:1.
[76] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 51.
[77] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 51.

invited to undertake an exercise in taxonomy not unlike the later work of Darwin himself. For Brueggemann, the sin of the gardeners was in wanting knowledge *instead of* trust, and the tragedy was that 'they now know more that they could have wanted'.[78] This desire to go beyond trust as God's creatures is fundamentally a sin of pride. Adam and Eve were not created to be kings, nor did God's purposes for humanity include kingship (1 Samuel 8, Matthew 20:25-6 and 1 Peter 5:3), but humans craved more. Pride led to a desire for power instead of trust.

It is important at this stage to emphasise that just as the passage seeks to describe rather than explain, so too we must acknowledge that human sinfulness, like evil itself, is not ultimately 'explicable'.[79] Bonhoeffer says evil must remain 'completely incomprehensible [because] every attempt to make it understandable merely takes the form of an accusation that the creature hurls against the Creator'.[80] Neither does God resolve evil through explanation, but instead comes to 'suffer the worst that evil could do to him'.[81] Nor should we exaggerate the satanic component of evil which might reduce human culpability or elevate it to something it is not. Charles Mathewes explores Hannah Arendt's description of Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem to describe an evil which, although profound and extreme, was carried out in a banal, bureaucratic manner.[82] The simple careless absence of good can cause immense harm; failing to believe in God's ultimate good can result in highly toxic relativism.

But the question remains as to whether there are areas of knowledge which we would do well to avoid? Can theological research probe forbidden knowledge? For Barth all knowledge of God comes from 'the revelation of His Word by the Holy Spirit'.[83] Thus, unless God

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[78] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 49.
[79] T. A. Noble, 'Original Sin and the Fall: definitions and a proposal' in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall: Theological Challenges* edited by R. J. Berry and T.A. Noble (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 113.
[80] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 119.
[81] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 114.
[82] Charles T. Mathewes, 'A Tale of Two Judgments: Bonhoeffer and Arendt on Evil, Understanding, and Limits', *Journal of Religion* 80.3 (2000): 375–404.
[83] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, ed. G. Bromiley and T. Torrance (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 1.

reveals himself, such knowledge is impossible, and if he has revealed himself, we can conclude that in those respects he desires to be known. However, such knowledge is not 'objective' it is 'indirectly objective' as it comes to us in forms suitable to us as his creatures: Jesus Christ, the scriptures, the church, preaching, sacraments and 'in the whole world of His work and sign'.[84] Without these mediators it is impossible to know God *in abstractio*, despite repeated human attempts to do so which Barth describes as 'like a rank weed, clinging even to what is apparently the soundest stalk, weakening it and finally killing it'.[85] This should warn us that misplaced attempts to know the unknowable may arise from high motives, which is a salutary lesson even for confessing theological researchers. There are aspects of God's objectivity which 'remain a mystery to us' even as he reveals himself with 'clarity and certainty'.[86] Similarly, Bonhoeffer saw Eve's conversation with the serpent as a theological discussion 'about God' but in a way that 'reaches beyond' God (and thus misses the target).[87] Bonhoeffer views the resulting desire to be like God as a misplaced form of excessive 'piety' rather than rebelliousness though ultimately that is what it turns out to be.[88] In our world such 'piety' more often takes the form of a secular political correctness which critically rejects the normative teachings of the church, preferring to define 'good and evil' in individualistic terms, once more leading to an unrooted relativism.

We have therefore identified four possible dangers suggested by Genesis 2:17; scepticism or idle speculation, pride desiring power instead of trust, banal relativistic carelessness, and an excessive piety which attempts to reach beyond God's revelation. However, if we exercise a healthy restraint towards the 'hidden and inscrutable' and carefully honour secrets about the human heart which should not be

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[84] Barth, *CD* II/1, 14 and 21.
[85] Barth, *CD* II/1, 20.
[86] Barth, *CD* II/1, 39.
[87] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 111.
[88] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 116.

exposed, then none of this should represent a call to ignorance, but rather to trust.[89]

Theological research categorisation and risk analysis.

Theological research may take many forms each of which may be prone to one or more of these dangers. It can be categorised according to the field of study in which it is situated (biblical studies, church history, doctrine or practical theology) or the methodologies used (literature review, biblical exegesis, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research) but there is nearly always some degree of overlap across disciplines, and the best theological research often aims for 'thick descriptions' drawing on a number of methodologies. Creswell and Creswell suggest that the more important fundamental categorisation is the underlying worldview adopted by the researcher which may take one of four forms.[90] Postpositivism affirms the presence of an objective reality which is being investigated (though it is 'post' in the sense that it acknowledges the limits to our knowledge capabilities).[91] Constructivism contends that individuals develop subjective interpretations of the world, and the researcher aims to collate these meanings via open-ended questions probing the interaction between individuals to arrive at a socially constructed meaning.[92] Transformative worldviews are politically shaped, intending to move beyond description towards bringing change especially for the marginalized.[93] Finally the pragmatic worldview is concerned with what works to solve a problem, rather than being committed to developing an underlying theory.[94] We will consider each worldview, how it shapes theological research, and what dangers it may be prone to, in turn.

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[89] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 52.
[90] John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 5.
[91] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 6-7.
[92] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 7-8.
[93] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 9-10.
[94] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 10-11.

Postpositivism fits with the classical scientific method approach whereby objective truth is available to be investigated. By using rigorous methodology and a quantitative approach it seeks to avoid errors of bias and subjectivity. Positivist approaches that provide a sense of certainty may be prone to the sin of pride and the misappropriation of power that can come from those in control of systems of knowledge which tend towards reductionism. For example 'scientism', the belief that 'the last word on what we are is to be spoken by natural science' is popular with the 'new atheists' of Dawkins etc.[95] Medawar recognised the fallacy of this belief in 1984; even while acknowledging the enormous explanatory power of science he was nevertheless content to allow for the possible validity of 'transcendent' answers arising from myth, metaphysics or religion.[96] Webster agrees that theological enquiry should result not just in objective 'science' but also in contemplative and practical outcomes—it should shape and change us.[97] Theological researchers who are resistant to this change may be guilty of the pride that Genesis warns against. Bonhoeffer graphically describes the consequences of this, as unregenerate humankind becomes 'the lord of its own world […] the solitary lord and despot of its own mute, violated, silenced, dead, ego-world'.[98]

Constructivism is a useful approach when the research encompasses a wide range of viewpoints concerning the area being studied. It may be employed when exploring both doctrinal or practical matters, employing the methods of interview, questionnaire, and literature reviews to collate ideas. The greatest risk may be of misrepresenting the views of others, either due to an unrecognised prior commitment on behalf of the researcher, or through carelessness. Arendt reminded us that great harm can result from banal carelessness towards others, and this highlights the importance of a robust ethical approach to research. Research ethics should never be merely a bureaucratic tick-box exercise in 'moral fastidiousness' but should arise from genuine

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[95] Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham: Acumen, 2012), 343.
[96] Peter Medawar, *The Limits of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 88.
[97] Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?', 17-28.
[98] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 142.

concern to protect the subjects of research from any possible harm, including unintended consequences.[99] Beauchamp and Childress set out four widely accepted principles of ethics in 1977 which are applicable across many disciplines; respecting the autonomy of the subject, beneficence (desiring their good), non-maleficence (avoiding their harm) and justice (ensuring that benefits and risks are shared fairly within society).[100] To maximise autonomy when conducting a wide range of qualitative research (especially narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic and case studies) it is a pre-requisite to obtain informed consent, being clear about confidentiality and having due regard for the 'secrets of the human heart'.[101]

Transformative worldview. Helen Cameron calls this 'critical realism', in that it seeks to critique underlying metanarratives of meaning.[102] But this presents a problem for the confessing theological researcher who does believe in a metanarrative of God's overarching plan for his creation which is not open to question. Of course, criticising our *human understanding* of God's plan is fair game, but should this include critiquing received church tradition? Bennett *et al* recognise 'an uneasy balance' between commitment and challenge when researchers confront church tradition.[103] The 'knowledge of good and evil' in Genesis implies a form of moral autonomy; in this sense Adam and Eve become 'like God', but as they are finite their determination of right and wrong is flawed.[104] The risk of an overly critical worldview for theological research may lie either in extending criticism beyond its proper scope through a misplaced belief in what constitutes 'perfection' as defined by secular political correctness, or conversely in refraining from critiquing church tradition through a misplaced sense

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[99] Mathewes, 'A Tale of Two Judgments', 388.
[100] Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.
[101] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 13.
[102] Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (London: SCM, 2013), 30.
[103] Zoë Bennett, Elaine Graham, Stephen Pattison and Heather Walton, *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (London: Routledge, 2018), 106.
[104] A.N.S. Lane, 'Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin' in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall* edited by R J Berry and T A Noble*,* 145.

of religious piety. A. N. S. Lane picks up the child-development analogy found in Genesis to suggest that Adam was not created 'perfect' or 'sinful' but 'immature'.[105] Similarly in Hebrews 5:8-9 Christ learns obedience and becomes perfected. Transformation is certainly part of God's design, but this is not merely 'restoration', it is towards a telos of 'vastly more' which is God's plan, not our own.[106] Theological researchers should be cautious lest their pious desire for 'perfection' blind them to their own imperfect capacity for critical judgment.

Pragmatic approaches seek to link theory and practice and are exemplified by theological action research (TAR) and mixed methods research (MMR). MMR combines qualitative and quantitative research to capture the full complexity of the matter being studied and to propose answers.[107] TAR similarly attends to all 'four voices' of theology (normative, formal, espoused and operant), but its focus on 'what works' can lead to accusations of value-free relativism.[108] Taken to an extreme this may result in excessive scepticism towards any prior truth claims—such scepticism may be inappropriate in theology. Christian theology already knows the answer to life's problems, they have been revealed in the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[109] Properly understood therefore, theological research is not about reductively simplifying situations, but rather 'complexifying' them; exploring the complexities of the questions to which the answers of Christianity are given, rather than questioning the answers themselves.[110]

A further ethical consideration for theological research, especially but not solely that of a pragmatic or action research nature, is that theology should aim to result in greater faithfulness towards God. Thus it

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[105] Lane, 'Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin', 131.
[106] Lane, 'Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin', 133.
[107] Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 4.
[108] Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), 54 and 43.
[109] Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 30.
[110] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 13.

'requires more than simply problem-solving. It involves consciousness-raising'.[111]

Conclusion

Throughout the Bible, wisdom and knowledge are regarded as positive goods to be pursued, for example Proverbs 15:14. In Colossians 2:2-8 Paul also encourages wisdom and knowledge where this is compatible with Jesus Christ, but warns against human argument (pride), deceptive philosophy (scepticism) blind tradition (excessive piety) and spiritual syncretism (relativism). By rooting our theological research in Jesus Christ, including an openness to be transformed by his Spirit as we learn more about the bible, doctrine, the church and practical matters, we can guard against these errors. Berry and Noble conclude their study of Darwin and Creation saying 'It is our contention that there is no conflict between Holy Scripture and modern science.'[112] This essay similarly contends that knowledge derived from theological research, when conducted with appropriate reverence towards God and ethical regard towards its subjects, and with an appropriate awareness of its own limitations, is also not in conflict with God's purposes and may enrich his church and help to build his kingdom.

Note on Contributor

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[111] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 256.
[112] R. J. Berry and T. A. Noble, 'Epilogue: the sea of faith – Darwin didn't drain it' in *Darwin, Creation and Fall* edited by R. J. Berry and T. A. Noble, 204.

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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.