

THE WHITLEY LECTURE  
2003

TRADITION AND RENEWAL  
IN BAPTIST LIFE

Stephen R. Holmes

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## **The Whitley Lecture**

The Whitley Lectureship was first established in 1949, in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861-1947), arguably the first systematic modern Baptist historian. Whitley was a notable scholar and servant of the Church of Christ. He had pastorates in England and Australia. He served the denomination in both countries in many ways, including pursuing historical studies.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society (1908). He edited its journal which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents. Altogether he made a particularly remarkable contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding, providing an inspiring model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the Lectureship in his name was intended to be an encouragement to research by Baptist scholars into aspects of Christian life and thought and to enable the results of such research to be published and available to the denomination and beyond.

The Whitley Lectureship's Management Committee is composed of representatives of the Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist Ministers Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society.

Through the years the encouragement towards scholarship has taken different forms, from the full support of the writing of lectures for publication by a designated Whitley Lecturer to the making available of smaller grants to those working at particular research interests.

In 1996 the Management Committee of the Whitley Lectureship began a new initiative in keeping with the original purpose. It was agreed to appoint each year a Lecturer to write and deliver a lecture as a contribution to scholarly Baptist thought. Each lecture will be published.

The Management Committee is delighted that the Revd Dr Stephen Holmes is the seventh lecturer in the new series. Steve was

converted and baptized at St Andrew's Street Baptist Church while studying physics at Cambridge. He trained for ministry at Spurgeon's College, and continued there as Research Fellow whilst assistant pastor at West Wickham and Shirley Baptist Church and pursuing doctoral studies at King's College London. He made a study of the American Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, and has a continuing interest in Reformed theology and also in understanding human culture theologically. He is now Lecturer in Christian Doctrine in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London; an Associate Lecturer at Spurgeon's College; and a member of the Leadership Team at Ashford (Middlesex) Baptist Church.

**RICHARD KIDD**  
on behalf of the Management Committee

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Stephen R. Holmes

INTRODUCTION: TRADITION AND RENEWAL<sup>1</sup>

For all my Christian life I have been hearing complaints about tradition, and demands for renewal, in Baptist churches. I confess that such complaints and demands have often seemed merely opaque to me. I did not grow up in a Baptist church, or indeed one of any other denomination, and so do not have that childhood sense of a way things have always been done that seems common to so many. I was converted in 1989, at the age of nineteen, into a Baptist church which I now know would have been considered traditional – tellingly, the hymnbook had green covers – but which bore the marks of many renewals of its life and worship. Two music groups, one of them even then making a use of electronic possibilities that would be the envy of any church I have been in since, brought different strands of the explosion of new music that began in the charismatic renewal to enrich our services. Those services,

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1 The doctrinal, rather than historical, parts of this lecture owe an immense amount to conversations I have had over a number of years with Dr John Colwell of Spurgeons College, to the extent that I would have difficulty knowing which lines of argument are my own, and which I learnt from John. The final statements here are my responsibility, of course, and any errors or infelicities with them, but John must take a great deal of the credit for whatever is found of value here.

however, bore marks of structure that testified to an earlier enrichment, an earlier renewal, by the liturgical movement of the middle of the twentieth century. The church's outreach, powerful and effective, was patterned in ways that would have been inconceivable without the renewal of Christian thinking brought about by the social gospel movement and, later, liberation theology. In narrating its history, the fact that Charles Haddon Spurgeon had begun his preaching ministry whilst a member of that fellowship recalled the second evangelical revival and the new things that had happened in a previous century. I cannot now tell what mixture of the arrogance of youth and the boldness that comes from God's calling enabled me to escape what should have been the crushing weight of such history and begin to preach there myself, but when I did so I discovered that the first evangelical revival had alike left its marks, as I prayed before preaching seated in a pulpit chair that had belonged to William Carey. If this was a 'traditional' church, its tradition was no more than a patchwork of earlier renewals.

This, it seems to me, is an appropriate state for a church to be in. I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that our historical particularity is a part of the way God has been pleased to create us, and so something to be celebrated rather than escaped from. Just so, any attempt simply to recreate or preserve the church of the apostolic age, or indeed of any other, is theologically mistaken. Rather, the church exists as a historical entity, as well as a supra-historical one (the church militant and triumphant); the faith and practices of the church are passed on ('traditioned') from generation to generation, and from culture to culture, and they are re-expressed to meet the particular needs and to address the particular sins of each new context. What has gone before cannot be forgotten or discarded, since it, too, is a part of the context in which God has been pleased to place us. Rather, receiving the faith as it has come down to us, it is our task to hand it on again, with errors corrected, truths cemented, and the whole shaped to bring the unchanging truths of the gospel to bear on each new context.

Just so, a church whose practices are never renewed, and a church

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2 In my *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002). See particularly chh. 1-2 and 10.

whose practices are wholly new, are alike failing to be the church God intends them to be. Tradition, the continual process of handing on the essence of the gospel to the next generation, and renewal, the continual process of re-clothing the gospel to speak to the failures and aspirations of the present generation, are alike necessary parts of church life, and indeed of all created life. As such, tradition and renewal are alike intended by God and blessed and called good by him. Every church should be a patchwork of renewals, or (and perhaps better) a mosaic of different pieces, grabbed from wherever they were found and put to service still because they are still judged relevant, able to be a part of the picture of Christ that the church is seeking to display.

This is not, however, to dismiss the complaints and demands with which I began. They are heard too often for that. God's people, or a large proportion of them, in Baptist churches at least, feel that that which has been traditioned, literally, 'handed on' to them by those who came before, lacks something vital, and that only a renewal of worship or evangelism or personal spirituality or congregational structure or church life can restore this vitality, this life-force. An old wineskin that is a patchwork of what has gone before might not have the strength to contain the new wine of the Spirit, or so it seems to be feared. Such intuitions, when widespread, must of course be taken with utmost seriousness: as one called first and foremost to the pastoral ministry, I at least simply cannot and will not ignore Christian people and churches who are hungry to be closer to God. Such intuitions, equally, demand analysis: 'there is nothing so deceitful as the human heart' as the prophet reminds us, and even those traditions of theology which have taken human religious experience to be determinative insist on categorising it according to certain analytical standards. Theological traditions which are based on claims like those made in the BUGB Declaration of Principle, that truth is known through God's revelation alone, will be even more chary of taking the self-analysis of the needs of Christian people at face value.

Before turning to such analysis, we might notice the ways in which the processes of tradition and renewal can go wrong. Renewal can fail when something that was a genuine and powerful application of the gospel message is discarded and replaced because it is judged offensive,

irrelevant or incomprehensible by the standards of the day. Tradition can fail when such accommodations are passed on. To say that God intends the life of the church to be a dynamic of tradition and renewal is not to say that every tradition, or every renewal is a good and Godly thing. Each must be judged according to the canons of the gospel, and faithfulness to Christ must be maintained at all costs.

Theologically, however, that is the only relevant test. A renewal movement might, in its origin, be built on faulty exegesis, mistaken history, or bizarre psychology. Such roots do not invalidate the movement (to argue that they do would be to commit a theological version of the genetic fallacy). Intellectual mistakes must be corrected, of course: the one who declares 'I am the truth' is not well-served by falsehoods. A practice that was introduced for dubious reasons, however, may turn out to be powerful and effective in promoting gospel-shaped living amongst God's people. This should come as no surprise: we know well that, in the good pleasure of God, even our errors can serve his providential purposes.

What I intend to do in this lecture, then, is to analyse some of the places where renewal is being sought and found by Baptist Christians today, in order to uncover some, at least, of the underlying needs, desires and hopes that are driving the quest for renewal. I will then use some theological resources from the Baptist tradition to suggest that there may be other places where we would do better to seek the renewal we desire.

#### STREAMS OF RENEWAL

The word 'renewal' used without a qualifier usually refers to charismatic renewal, at least in Baptist life.<sup>3</sup> There are, however, several other traditions that are being discovered and appropriated by Baptist Christians, and which are clearly leading to the renewal of lives and churches. Alongside charismatic renewal, I will examine what I take to be the main three others: the retreat movement, Celtic spirituality, and

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3 In most British Protestant church life, indeed. I understand, however, that in some more catholic contexts the term might be understood to translate *aggiornamento*, the controlling metaphor of the Second Vatican Council (on which see, e.g., Christopher Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London: DLT, 1967) pp. 7-27).

the ecumenical movement, by which I mean not so much contact with other British denominations as a process of learning from churches across the world. I do not pretend that this list is exhaustive: I know of churches or people whose lives and ministries have been renewed by Black theology, or forms of urban theology, and so on, and my knowledge of the denomination is no doubt fairly partial, in both senses of that word, but one must stop somewhere.

All these streams bear the classic marks of a renewal movement: an earlier minority tradition is being appealed to, or learnt from, consciously or unconsciously, but at the same time the appeal and its consequences are such that what is being commended is, in each case, not a recreation or transplanting of the earlier tradition, but the creation of something new, albeit similar. In musical terms, this is not the early music movement, attempting as far as is possible to recreate exact replicas of Palestrina's concerti as they would have sounded when he played them; rather, it is the neo-classicism of Stravinsky, or the renewal of folk music by Vaughan Williams and other English pastoral composers: a re-invigoration of the present, and the creation of a new future, by a learning from the past.

This reflection is intended more as description than as criticism; indeed I think there are good theological reasons why a re-appropriation of, say, the Celtic tradition should produce what we might call a 'neo-celticism', rather than a slavish copying of all that was before. One might wish that some of those who publicly and aggressively commend Celtic Christianity might be a little more aware of the fact that what they are commending is a twenty-first-century tradition, not an eighth-century one, but the fact that it is is not something to worry unduly about, and indeed may even be something to be celebrated. The gospel of Christ, the one who speaks from the throne of heaven and declares that he is making all things new, is in one sense unchanging and unchangeable, but in another sense it constantly changes. The telling of the gospel story, and the preaching of the cross must remain without addition, diminution or alteration until the end of time;<sup>4</sup> the way the story is told must constantly

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4 And indeed beyond, as they will form the heart of the worship of the saints in heaven: 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing...'

vary to rebuke the particular sins and fulfil the particular aspirations of each particular age and culture. As I have already argued, our time is not St Columba's; just so, whilst we hold to, preach and live the same faith as St Columba held to, preached and lived, we do it in different ways, to touch a different age.<sup>5</sup> To seek to re-create St Columba's faith and Christian practice in every detail would be foolish, ineffective and theologically illegitimate; to recognize that some of his insights speak powerfully to some of our own questions and blindnesses is, by contrast, both helpful and proper.<sup>6</sup>

Given all this, it will be no surprise that I think that the particular ways in which the modern renewal movements adjust the traditions to which they appeal are revealing and instructive for an understanding of the particular needs and opportunities of the present time. Again, there is a need for careful analysis: one could find many examples in the history of the Church of traditions which, uncritically listened to, would encourage us to adopt beliefs and practices that are clearly less than Christian,<sup>7</sup> and so any particular appeal to a tradition must be in danger of pandering to current idolatries, rather than meeting authentic spiritual desires. I suggest, however, that if a particular feature can be found in all the four renewal movements I have mentioned, and if it can be shown that that feature is consistent with a gospel-shaped life, then we may presume that we have uncovered a significant feature of the landscape of contemporary Baptist life.

Let me begin, then, with the present revival of interest in Celtic Christianity, as I have already started that discussion. That Celtic identity is a modern construction, with almost no discernible basis in history, has been argued often enough, as has the corollary, that to call anything

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5 See, again, the cited chapters of my *Listening to the Past*.

6 This point is expanded in the discussion of the utility of hagiography in ch. 2 of *Listening to the Past*.

7 The most basic example must be anti-Semitism, on which see *Listening to the Past* ch. 10 (for my own comments on its prevalence within the Christian tradition), and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism* (London: HarperCollins, 1992) for some history.

'celtic', including a tradition of Christianity, is merely anachronistic.<sup>8</sup> These facts make the point more difficult to argue, since the precise tradition which is being appealed to by the renewal movement becomes something rather slippery,<sup>9</sup> but they are not in themselves especially relevant: the vitality of a renewal movement does not depend on its commitment to the standards of academic historiography. If I restrict myself to two, somewhat different, traditions of Christian spirituality which are usually subsumed under the heading 'celtic', the point can be made effectively enough.

First, then, the tradition of early medieval Irish Christianity that developed after the barbarian conquest of England had largely separated the Irish church from the mother church in Rome. Compared to the rest of the Latin-speaking churches, some fairly striking differences in development can be observed.<sup>10</sup> To mention only three, there was a distinctive form of monasticism,<sup>11</sup> a commitment to a form of 'nature-asceticism',<sup>12</sup> and a retention of certain aspects of neoplatonic

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- 8 On all this see variously Marion Bowman, 'Reinventing the Celts', *Religion* 23 (1993), pp. 147-56; Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (London, 1992); Wendy Davies, 'The myth of the Celtic church', in N. Edwards and A. Lane (ed.), *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992), pp 12-21; Simon James, 'Celts, politics and motivation in archaeology' *Antiquity* lxii (1998), 200-9; Kathleen Hughes, 'The Celtic church: is this a valid concept?', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (Summer 1981) pp 1-20. Many other studies are available.
- 9 Robert Ellis, in an article in the *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, calls the original Celtic Christian tradition 'amorphous'. 'On a Journey of the Spirit' *BMJ* 271 (July 2000) pp. 19-22; the quotation is on p. 19.
- 10 This, however, should not blind us to the continuities with the Roman church. See, for instance, N.K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (Oxford: OUP, 1961) pp. 23-9, arguing that the various writings attributed to St Patrick are clearly within a continental tradition, and suggest familiarity with recent papal documents.
- 11 On which see, for instance, M rie and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958) ch.2, or E.G. Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1977) ch. 5.
- 12 See Chadwick, *The Age of Saints*, pp. 84-118 for some discussion.

philosophy. In different ways, all these facets suggest that, although there was no sustained contact, the Irish church did not grow apart from the Greek-speaking churches in quite the same way that much of Latin Christianity did.<sup>13</sup> The asceticism of the Irish monks has more in common with the Desert Fathers than anything recognisable in the traditions that grew from John Cassian's experiments, and the technical theology is rather more reminiscent of Gregory of Nyssa than of Boethius, as any acquaintance with the work of John Scotus Eriugena will demonstrate.

A second 'celtic' tradition, more influential and more concentrated, might be the missionary movement which began with Columba's arrival at Iona, which continued into Northumbria with Aiden's settlement of Holy Isle, and which might be said to have begun to lose its distinctiveness after the Synod of Whitby. The obvious distinctive features of this tradition are again its monasticism, and also its commitment to evangelistic pilgrimage – the practice of *peregrinatio*.<sup>14</sup>

The difference of all of this from the modern renewal of Celtic spirituality should be obvious: not only are such factors as monasticism, asceticism and *peregrinatio* simply absent (although the last is sometimes re-cast as some inner journey of the soul<sup>15</sup>), but the creation-centred spirituality that is celebrated appears to anyone familiar with the original traditions to be a rather minor strand. Indeed, like the followers of Anthony in the Egyptian desert, the monks chained themselves to Skellig Michael to do battle with the demons of the wilderness, not to find God in creation.<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that there is no commonality

13 See Chadwick, *The Age of Saints*, pp. 35-60 for some evidence for these claims.

They are embraced in at least some of the popular literature commending Celtic spirituality – see, for instance, Roger Ellis and Chris Seaton, *New Celts: Following Jesus into Millennium 3* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1998) pp. 38-40.

14 Not absent, of course, from Irish Christianity (see Chadwick, pp. 80-4 for some evidence and discussion).

15 So Ellis, 'On a Journey of the Spirit', pp. 19-20.

16 'Few detail the less congenial aspects of the Celtic tradition, eg the cursing of the water beast on Loch Ness or the painful penitentials such as the crack of the whip or being made to stand in the North Sea for a period of prayer and fasting. As Professor Donald Meek of Edinburgh University observes: "Few of the

– the renewal movement has indeed found certain emphases in certain texts, but what has been built on them is something new, not a slavish revival of something old. In place of the emphasis on journey and on battling with the demons, there is an emphasis on finding God in the ordinary, in creation and in the everyday tasks of life.<sup>17</sup> These emphases are there particularly in the monasticism of the earlier tradition, but they are nowhere near as central as in its renewal.

Turning to the renewal of spirituality that many Baptists, and others, are discovering in the retreat movement, a similar story can be told. The essence of the retreat movement lies in a renewal of traditions of meditative and contemplative prayer, particularly from the medieval and early modern period. The writings of mystics such as Mother Julian of Norwich or St Ignatius Loyola are republished and re-read to provide inspiration for a discipline of prayer which can sustain spiritual life today. Again, one can find practical emphases that were present in the original tradition but have been largely ignored by the renewal movement – asceticism is once more the most obvious example. However, it is a theological aspiration that interests me.

Denys Turner, in one of the more significant recent academic texts on the contemplative tradition, argues that medieval, and indeed patristic, contemplative prayer was fundamentally non-experimental, or even anti-experimental.<sup>18</sup> Experiences of God in prayer were noted, but regarded as at best irrelevant and at worst a positive hindrance to the practice of contemplation. A sense of overwhelming love, or peace, or joy was in danger of becoming a goal in itself, and so distracting the journeying soul from its true goal. To substitute pursuit of an experience of God for pursuit of God was to surrender to idolatry, of a particularly subtle and dangerous kind. God led on the contemplative through a ‘dark night of

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movement’s advocates have yet taken to living on Rockall or the Old Man of Hoy...’ Roy Searle, ‘Exploring the Celtic Tradition’ *BMJ* 243 (July 1993) pp. 3-7, quotation from p. 3.

17 So Searle and Ellis in the articles above which, being published in the *BMJ*, are perhaps the most authoritative sources for determining how this movement is affecting Baptist life.

18 Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

the soul', where there was no sense of his presence, no experience of his love, but only the desire for him. Those whose spirituality involved ecstatic moments, experience of communion with God, or even divine prophecies and revelations, were demonstrated to be mere beginners in the way of prayer (notice that Mother Julian only writes of her 'shewings' twenty years after experiencing them<sup>19</sup>). The mature contemplative took no more notice of a sudden flood of overwhelming joy whilst praying than she did of a sudden chorus of birdsong; God is as far removed from the one as from the other, beyond the 'cloud of unknowing', in a darkness so bright as to be dazzling.

Modern writings on contemplative prayer, by contrast, whilst usually acknowledging some of this in a footnote or similar, constantly stress the experience of God to be gained through the practice of prayer and retreat. Ecstasy is not quite the end of prayer, but it is assumed that ecstasy experienced in prayer is simply and unambiguously an experience of God, so such experiences are a mark of 'successful' praying, whatever that may mean. We go on retreat to encounter God, and experience of God in prayer is the demonstration that we have encountered him, and the reward for encountering him.<sup>20</sup> The 'dark night of the soul' is acknowledged, but it is something to be endured until experience returns, not something to be desired as the end of experience and the beginnings of a new, and much better, stage of the journey of prayer.

Again, let me stress that the point of all this is not to criticise, but to explore. As it happens, I think that much of the negative language about prayer found in the mystical tradition grows from some dubious ideas found in Pseudo-Dionysius, which gained a spurious authority because

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19 See ch.51 of the *Revelations of Divine Love*.

20 In responding to a survey on spirituality in the ministry, the President of BUGB for 2003-4, John Rackley, comments that he is both surprised and disturbed by the fact that only one respondent listed the study of theology 'as a source of spiritual refreshment,' a position which would have been assumed by almost all the medieval mystics. If my analysis here is correct, this is not at all surprising, however disturbing it may be: theology may provide many things, but it is unlikely to offer its students an experiential encounter with God. John Rackley, 'Travellers' Tales: Spirituality in the Ministry' *BMJ* 252 (Oct 1995) pp. 26-30; quotation from p. 29.

they were assumed to be virtually apostolic.<sup>21</sup> I am not at all sure that I have any right to comment negatively on the teachings on prayer by those who have journeyed incomparably further down that road than I can ever hope to, but, speaking simply as a theologian, a way of praying that is prepared to celebrate God's good gifts, and trusts him not to lead us into idolatry through them, does seem to me to be more consonant with the gospel than some of the more extreme statements of the medieval masters. What I want to suggest for the purposes of this lecture, however, is that the ways in which the renewal of the mystical tradition has subtly changed the original emphases are indicative of something about Christian experience today, whether they be right or wrong.

The same may be said of what I have called the ecumenical renewal. Here the form of renewing the tradition is slightly different, in that the source of renewal is not a historical tradition but traditions from cultures foreign to us from across the world, particularly from the growing churches of the two-thirds world. Statistically, those churches that are growing are usually broadly pentecostal in tradition and often teach some sort of 'prosperity gospel', stressing the material blessings and physical healings with which God will reward conversion and obedience. They are also often morally conservative and rather judgmental, when assessed by European or American standards. The bishop who responded to a gay-rights campaigner at the last Lambeth Conference by attempting to perform an exorcism was in many ways no more than a majority representative of the world's growing churches.

What is taken from these traditions to renew European churches, and particularly British Baptist life, is however rather different. In part there is a theological borrowing, looking not to the majority theologies but to liberation theology and its offspring. More relevant to my purposes, there is a borrowing of worship material, particularly of songs. We borrow

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21 According to Acts 17, a man called Dionysius, who was a member of the Areopagus, was converted by Paul in Athens. Early tradition has him as the first bishop of Athens (Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* 3.4.10). Sometime after A.D. 500, a body of writings emerged that were attributed to this Dionysius, and which offer a Neoplatonic vision of the ordering of the spiritual world, and of human spirituality. Because of the attribution, now universally held to be false, these writings were held in great esteem throughout the Middle Ages.

these songs to enable us to share in the experience of God that our sisters and brothers enjoy, enriching our worship with musical expressions of the insights of their traditions.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the majority strand of renewal that affects our Baptist life is charismatic renewal. Historically, of course, the influence of Pentecostal traditions is decisive here, with its emphasis on a second blessing, the baptism of the Spirit, which brings the fullness of Christian life. What is interesting to my present argument, however, are the adjustments in the way in which that fullness is described: where Pentecostal traditions have often stressed the gift of holiness, or evangelistic effectiveness, in charismatic gatherings people look to meet with God. Traditional Pentecostalism, with roots in holiness movements and Keswick teaching, has usually stressed moral transformation and power for mission as the fundamental results of baptism in the Spirit, with the gift of tongues and any accompanying spiritual experience acting merely as signs that the baptism has taken place. In the charismatic renewal, by contrast, a new experience of God becomes central in accounts of what Spirit-baptism brings. The more recent charismatic practice of seeking repeated 'blessings' through regular response to times of ministry points to the same shift in understanding: the ministry practices associated with John Wimber's Vineyard churches and with the 'Toronto blessing' are particularly obvious examples.

What I have sought to argue in this rapid survey of some of the strands of renewal that are affecting Baptist life is that in each case, one of the ways in which the original tradition has been tweaked by its renewal has been a greater emphasis on experience of God. Celtic Christianity is less about battling demons in the wilderness and more about finding God in the ordinary; we go on retreat to experience God, where once contemplatives discouraged this; world music is borrowed not so that we may learn the moral seriousness and theological naivete of some growing churches, but so that we may vicariously share in their

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22 This argument was made by Myra Blyth in an unpublished paper given at a theological consultation held at Luther King House in Manchester in 2001. The foreword and preface to a hymnbook such as *World Praise* makes the same point, as do the introductory comments to the various collections of 'Songs of the World Church' published by the Iona Community.

experience of God; we seek charismatic blessing precisely as a felt encounter with the Spirit. I argued above that, if there was a common feature in the way all these traditions were adjusted in being renewed, we would be justified in assuming that this was a significant aspect of Christian life in our Baptist denomination today. So I suggest that our people are hungry for experience of God, and looking in many, many places to find it. This is what drives the demands for renewal with which I began, and the various streams of renewal which I have been examining.

#### ANALYSING EXPERIENCE

However, I have also argued that such a hunger cannot simply be assumed to be an adequate picture of the needs of Baptist people, and that, whilst it must be taken with utmost seriousness, it needs analysis. The fact that the four traditions I have been talking about needed adjustment, and in one case straightforward reversal, before they could offer ways in which we might hope to experience God suggests that this desire is not common to all Christian people across the world and across the ages, so it is either a need felt particularly by people in our own local situation for some reason, or the particular local expression of a deeper and more universal desire. As it happens, I think both are true.

I suggest first that, with the sea of faith still in ebb tide, we are people with a particular, and pressing, need for some sort of proof that God is. It seems to be the case that people in Western Europe over the last two centuries or so have found it difficult to believe in God. That this difficulty is so recent, and so local, suggests that it is no more than a rather bizarre blip in intellectual history, but we happen to live in the middle of it and so must deal with that context. As one of the greatest of modern theologians, Freidrich Schleiermacher, recognized, the most convincing way to offer such a defence is through personal experience. There are various reasons for this in the intellectual history of the time, but I think that the triumph of natural science in the work of Isaac Newton is at the heart of much of it.

Newton's great achievement was to show that science *worked*: the fall of an apple and the motion of the planets could be explained and

predicted by the same simple equations. Grossly over-simplifying, two philosophical traditions find different roots in this triumph of scientific method: in continental Europe, the success of mathematics leads to a rationalist tradition of philosophy, which seeks to derive all truth from first principles.<sup>23</sup> In Anglophone countries,<sup>24</sup> by contrast, a tradition usually denominated empirical grew up, which saw the success of natural science as due to a concentration on observation, and so stressed experience as the basis of all knowledge.

To begin with, in this philosophical tradition, 'experience' meant narrowly 'sense-experience', so such an epistemology made Christian truth-claims more difficult. The arguments of Hume's *Enquiry*,<sup>25</sup> for instance, depend on precisely this tradition, particularly the famous essay, 'Of Miracles': repeated observation of the world suggests to us that miracles do not happen; given the assumed epistemology, no amount or quality of testimony to their occurrence should be sufficient to convince us that our observations are in fact erroneous, so, in the absence of any further considerations, we must conclude against the existence of miracles. One way of responding to this was to accept the premises, but to offer a counter argument, which sought to prove the existence of God, and so made miracles less unlikely than Hume's argument assumed. The classic example is Paley's argument in his *Natural Theology*: like a watch found on a moorland path, the world bears incontrovertible marks of having been designed by an intelligent designer, thus there is a God. Certain characteristics of this God can be deduced from the way he/she/it (at this point in the logic the question is still open) designed the world, which characteristics lead one to suppose that this God is not unlikely to intervene in the natural order in powerful ways in particular contexts.

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23 Descartes climbing into his stove to think out life is the example at the head of the tradition; a perhaps apocryphal story demonstrates the same point in arguably the greatest of the rationalists, Hegel. It is said that, at the end of one of his lectures, a student complained that nothing he had said had anything to do with reality. 'So much the worse for reality,' came the response.

24 John Locke in England; Thomas Reid in Scotland; George Berkeley in Ireland; Jonathan Edwards in America. It so happens that I cannot think of a significant Welsh philosopher of the day, either within this tradition or outside it.

25 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

Thus reports of miracles may be considered to be trustworthy, despite our lack of any confirmatory experience, just as an understanding of metrology may give the inhabitants of a tropical island good reason to believe reports of snow, despite their never having seen it.

This argument is rather out of fashion these days. I do not think it works, but not for the reasons that have led to its fall into disfavour. As Paley's simile of the watch makes abundantly clear, his concern is less with the emergence of complex organisms (although that feature is certainly present) than with co-operative systems, which Darwinian theory, with its controlling metaphors of competition and selfishness (even, now, on the genetic level) precisely cannot explain. A better argument of the same sort might be a moral one: the world described by evolutionary theory, in which nature is necessarily 'red in tooth and claw' before any human action can be cited as the cause of the entrance of evil into the world, does not in fact look like a beautifully ordered and designed system. My concern, however, learnt from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's biting critique,<sup>26</sup> is more with Paley's willingness to accept the underlying epistemology.

This is seen most clearly in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous essay, *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power*.<sup>27</sup> Lessing echoes Hume's opinions concerning the validity of testimony of the miraculous, drawing a sharp distinction between personal experience of a miracle and mere report. The main thrust of his argument, however, is far more devastating to orthodox Christian belief: he suggests that the highest class of truths, those on which all people should build their lives, must be fully and equally available to all people. Now, if either sense-experience (in the Anglophone empiricist tradition) or logic (in the continental rationalist tradition) is the ultimate arbiter of truth, then contingent facts of history

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26 'I more than fear the prevailing taste for Books of Natural Theology, Physico-Theology, Demonstrations of God from Nature, Evidences of Christianity, &c. &c. *Evidences of Christianity!* I am weary of the Word. Make a man feel the *want* of it; rouse him, if you can, to the self-knowledge of his need of it, and you may safely trust it to its own Evidence.' *Aids to Reflection* (ed. John Beer) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994)

27 Henry Chadwick (ed.) *Lessing's Theological Writings* (London: A&C Black, 1956)

cannot belong to this highest class of truths. Thus the gospel story must not, cannot, and does not finally matter. Jesus of Nazareth might be, as in nineteenth-century liberal traditions, in some sense the ultimate historical exemplar of spiritual truths, but those truths themselves are what matter, far more than the person, name and history of the Jewish man of that name.

Faced with such criticisms, the obvious court of appeal is to religious experience. My claims to experience of God are incontrovertible in an empiricist scheme, assuming that my sanity is not in doubt. If I can demonstrate that all people have some sort of inchoate spiritual experience, and that my particular theological tradition interprets this experience more successfully than any other, then all the arguments above are effectively countered. Coleridge attempted to do this with a form of Christian Platonism which gave spiritual vitality to liberal Anglicanism for some decades after his death,<sup>28</sup> but this tradition lost what influence it had some time ago. Two other attempts have proved more lasting.

Within more evangelical circles, the rise of revivalist traditions can be interpreted in these terms. Although remarkable events were noticed by the preachers of the first Evangelical Revival, the mainstream leaders, at least, refused to see them as any proof of God's presence or blessing.<sup>29</sup> The controversy seems clearest (to me, at least, but this may be just because of my own interests) in the Great Awakening, as the colonial New England strand of the revival is generally called. There, Jonathan Edwards devoted his considerable intellect, and much ink, to defending the proposition that remarkable 'spiritual' experiences mean precisely nothing, alike against those who would see them as signs of God's blessing and those who would see them as marks of madness.<sup>30</sup>

To demonstrate that Edwards is not unusual in his beliefs in his own

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28 On which see my essay on Coleridge in Colin E. Gunton and Christoph Schwöbel (eds) *The Nineteenth Century Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

29 John Wesley wavered more on this point than some others, it must be admitted.

30 This is most fully spelled out in the Second Part of the *Religious Affections*, but the argument runs through the earlier revival treatises, several sermons, and one or two other writings. I have offered some survey and analysis of these texts in my *God of Grace and God of Glory* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) pp. 170-84.

day, but that the new Evangelicalism of Britain and America a hundred years later thought very differently, I turn to hymnody. Those hymns that survive from each period, after all, may be assumed to do so not just because of some poetic and/or musical merit, but because they express sentiments that leaders desire to commend and that worshippers find congenial. Wesley, Watts and Newton, who taught the first revival to sing, largely express doctrinal truths in personal terms.<sup>31</sup> The confidence of 'And can it be,' the devotion of 'When I survey' and the gratitude of 'Amazing Grace' are all expressions of doctrines of atonement, even if the theology is straightforwardly Abelardian in the middle case. Charles Wesley's worship and wonderment are linked to forensic justification through substitutionary atonement ('I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood');<sup>32</sup> John Newton describes deeply personal experiences, to be sure, but they are the result of an assurance of God's grace, not the root of it ('How precious did that grace appear / The hour I first believed').

When we look to the hymnody of a hundred years later, a different tone is discernible. 'Blessed assurance,' and the continual daily praise that is linked to it, now flow from spiritual experiences: 'Perfect submission, perfect delight / Visions of rapture burst on my sight / Angels descending bring from above / Echoes of mercy, whispers of love ... I in my Saviour am happy and blest / Watching and waiting, looking above / Filled with his goodness, lost in his love.' It is immediate experience of God that is central now, not the theological realities which are assumed to underlie that experience. As Horton Davies put it in his magisterial account of *Worship and Theology in England*, 'sometimes the objectivity of the mighty acts of God in creation, redemption and sanctification was sacrificed for the sugary subjectivity and introspection

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31 The relevant chapters of J.R. Watson's *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) are helpful here.

32 The same, incidentally, is true of his brother's conversion experience; John Wesley would have been adamant that a 'heart strangely warmed' is worth precisely nothing if it is not linked to a 'trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation,' and 'an assurance ... that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.' (from Wesley's *Journal*, entry for Wednesday 24th May 1738).

of lyrical spiders forever examining their own insides.<sup>33</sup> Davies goes on to quote a writer from the turn of the twentieth century protesting at the fashion for ‘jingling verses that celebrate the “Sweet Saviour,” or protest how I love “my Jesus”.’<sup>34</sup>

As with any shift in intellectual assumptions, this break is neither neat nor clear. Well into the second half of the nineteenth century there are still examples of what on this schema would be the ‘old’ evangelicalism, and even into the twentieth: B.B. Warfield in Princeton, for example. Within British Baptist life, Spurgeon would seem to be a representative of the older tradition, and one can still occasionally find small independent Baptist fellowships, often denominating themselves as ‘Strict and Particular,’ ‘Free Grace,’ or some other such term, which remain suspicious of claims concerning religious experience, and look to older Puritan traditions of ‘making one’s calling and election sure’ through the practical syllogism. Nonetheless, I believe that a broad shift in emphasis can be discerned, which may be read as an apologetic response to broader philosophical shifts in the culture.

Alongside shifts in evangelicalism, a second tradition has proved resilient, built on very similar arguments, but heading in very different directions. At the head of this tradition are Freidrich Schleiermacher’s impassioned speeches to the cultured despisers of religion to recognize their own spiritual needs. Schleiermacher argued that the rediscovery of the livingness and beauty of the world by the first Romantic generation (the ‘cultured despisers’ of his title) grew from something more basic, a sense of the givenness of the world, and so of our utter dependence on something greater than ourselves. This ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ is common to all humanity, and is what is appropriated by religious traditions, and analysed by theological systems.<sup>35</sup> He proceeds to categorize religious systems according to how purely they respond to this

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33 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690-1900* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) vol. IV, p. 86.

34 Davies, p. 86 n. 46.

35 F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (tr. R. Crouter) (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) pp. 96-140 and *The Christian Faith* (ed. H.R. Mackintosh & J.S. Stewart)(Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), §§3-7; see also §50, on religious language.

feeling. The analysis suggests that Evangelical (i.e. Reformed) Protestantism is the purest response, and so a better, or higher, religious system than any other.<sup>36</sup>

On such an account, the relativization of the life and death of Jesus required by Lessing's presuppositions is simply accepted: Jesus becomes the one in whom the God-consciousness is most fully developed, the perfect exemplar of human piety. The various 'lives of Jesus,' so popular in nineteenth-century liberal theology, were examples of precisely this tendency, representing Jesus as the perfection of religiosity as it was conceived in the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Similar theological procedures, however, endure to this day: Otto's account of the *mysterium tremendum*,<sup>38</sup> Karl Rahner's analysis of 'subjectivity,'<sup>39</sup> or John Hick's

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36 It is perhaps worth noting, given the analysis common even to some uninformed Christian commentators, that nineteenth-century European assumptions of cultural superiority stem less from the Christian orthodoxy of earlier ages than from the liberal revision of this orthodoxy. Earlier Reformed thinkers, for example, ascribed no moral failure to non-Christian cultures (as opposed to non-Christian individuals) for not being Christian, since this merely indicated the good pleasure of God in his purposes in election. Indeed, they were commonly extremely complimentary about the heights reached by non-European civilisations on the basis of natural revelation alone, contrasting this very favourably with the degradation of Western cultures in spite of all the benefits God had been pleased to bestow on them (not least because this formed a useful apologetic against Deism). For some analysis of a representative of this tendency, see Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

37 This observation explains the standard complaints against this movement, that it mistook Jesus for a Victorian gentleman: if we begin with the presupposition that piety is fundamentally a particular form of universal human experience, a form which we have discovered through self-analysis, then inevitably we will discover that the piety of Jesus looks familiar, if that is at all possible. The remarkably naïve and uncontrolled ways of reading the gospel narratives that prevailed in the early liberal tradition made it only too possible, of course.

38 Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (tr. J.W. Harvey) (Oxford: OUP, 1923); see especially chh. 2-3.

39 See, for instance, his *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (tr. W.V. Dych) (London: DLT, 1978), esp. pp. 25-35.

analysis of the common core of religious traditions<sup>40</sup> are alike variations on this fundamental Schleiermachiian theme.<sup>41</sup>

One reason for seeking vital experience of God in the present Western cultural climate, then, is to meet the current need to prove the existence of God.<sup>42</sup> This reason, however, should apply equally to all Christian (indeed, all religious) traditions in Western culture over the past two centuries. Given that we are discussing Baptist life in particular, it is perhaps worth asking whether there is any particular reason in that tradition to desire to experience God. This is where the second of my points above becomes operative. The desire for experience of God is not just a particular local need caused by particular local conditions; it is also, I suggest, a particular modern form of a more basic need. This is the need not just to know that God is, but that God is for us.

As the apostle James notes, the demons, whatever this term might denote, know there is one God, and they shudder with fear as a result. For the knowledge of God's existence to be a comfort, and not just a threat, we need to know that God is favourably disposed towards us. I have argued elsewhere that one of the driving forces of the Reformed interest in the doctrine of predestination, particularly in an Anglophone context, was the desire to promote assurance of salvation amongst believers.<sup>43</sup> Calvin's account of election, for instance, is clearly directed

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40 See, for instance, 'Religious Faith as Experiencing-as,' 'The Copernican Revolution in Theology,' and 'The New Map of the Universe of Faiths' in *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973) pp.37-52, 120-32 and 132-47.

41 Interestingly, pre-Enlightenment attempts to find a common core to the world's religions tended to concentrate on shared doctrines, rather than shared experiences, and so belong to a rather different intellectual tradition. See, classically, the discussion of 'common notions' in Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury's *De Veritate*.

42 I should note that I find all such 'proofs' to be unconvincing, but that is not relevant to the present point.

43 *God of Grace* pp. 255-7.

to this end,<sup>44</sup> and studies of the development of Calvin's ideas in the Anglican church under the Tudors, and later amongst the Puritans, suggest that this point becomes more and more central.<sup>45</sup>

Baptist life owes its original impetus not just to the Reformed separatists of England, but also to continental Anabaptism.<sup>46</sup> The same questions, of how one could be sure of standing in God's favour, were live amongst the early Anabaptists as well.<sup>47</sup> The common answer given there seems rather different: a compilation of sources suggest that suffering is one, at least, of the guarantors of true discipleship: Jesus, who walked the way of the cross in opposition to the powers of this present age, leads his people along the same road, and those who follow him cannot expect to escape suffering and trials.<sup>48</sup>

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44 So, variously: '[w]e shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election...' (*Inst.* III.21.1); 'Satan has no more grievous or dangerous temptation to dishearten believers than when he unsettles them with doubts about their election...' (III.24.4); and '...the mind could not be infected with a more pestilential error than that which overwhelms and unsettles the conscience from its peace and tranquillity towards God' (III.24.4).

45 R.T. Kendall asserts that 'the fundamental concern in the theology of Perkins and his followers centres on the question, How can one know he is elect and not reprobate?' *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), p. 1. See also Dewey D. Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology 1525-1695* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), *passim*, but particularly, perhaps, his suggestion that Elizabethan alterations in the Articles of Religion were prompted by 'the growing Reformed use of predestination for providing assurance' (pp. 31-2).

46 I accept the common consensus that it is difficult to trace the precise lines of descent here, but Smyth and Helwys's contacts with Mennonites in Amsterdam at the beginning of the Baptist story must have had some effect.

47 Both the Puritan and Anabaptist movements asked these questions under persecution, which may be no coincidence. Such issues must be particularly pressing when one is suffering for the faith, as the example of John the Baptist, anxiously enquiring of Jesus from his prison cell, illustrates.

48 See Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981) pp. 85-117.

There is little evidence that this way of guaranteeing God's presence with his people passed into Baptist life,<sup>49</sup> but in any case the repeal of much of the Clarendon Code in the early 1800s would have made it an unsustainable argument, even if it had survived until then. About the same time, the rise of the new, evangelical, strand of Particular Baptist life (exemplified, of course, by Fuller's *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, and the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society and the Baptist Union) was tantamount to an acceptance that the old Reformed attempt to seek assurance by means of the practical syllogism had simply failed. There was a need for a new source of assurance of God's graciousness to each particular believer.

One possibility was a return to the medieval synthesis which the Reformation had disrupted, where assurance was found through participation in the sacramental life of the church, illustrated by Luther's basic position, 'baptismus sum'. This indeed was the path taken by some dissatisfied evangelicals, such as John Henry Newman, in the rise of the Oxford Movement. An alternative was available, however: if God's existence is to be proved by my direct experience of him, why not also his graciousness? And so the new desire for experience of God, which I have argued is still with us, can be seen as the modern form of an ancient quest for assurance, as well as a peculiarly modern way of proving what most ages never doubted, that God exists.

So almost<sup>50</sup> all vital traditions of European Christianity over the past two centuries have stressed experience of God, whether speaking of the ultimate ground of our being with Paul Tillich, or singing 'You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!' at a revivalist crusade, and recent renewal movements of all sorts in Baptist life demonstrate that this hunger for experience is still alive and well and living in Didcot. The remainder of this lecture will be taken up with an attempt to explain why I think all these quests for experience are a bad idea. Before moving

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49 There is a sense of it in such documents as the 'Preface' to the 1646 Second Edition of the 1644 Confession of Faith, but I suspect the intention there is more rhetorical than theological, particularly as the Confession itself avoids mentioning persecution as a mark of the church.

50 I suspect that the Oxford Movement may be an exception. If it is, this might lend weight to my argument for reasons already hinted at.

on to this, however, let me explain precisely what I am criticising. If God graciously chooses to grant experience of himself to his children, I am not about to criticise that.<sup>51</sup> Rather, I want to suggest that such experiences, however helpful and edifying and life-changing they may have been for the person concerned, cannot bear the weight of having the whole structure of theology and piety built upon them. When Billy Graham responds to the question of how he knows God exists with the assertion 'because he talked with me this morning', it is not the factuality of the assertion that concerns me, but the implication that it is an appropriate and adequate answer to the question.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE ANSWER

I have indicated reasons for supposing that the real issue here is assurance of God's favour, rather than proof of God's existence,<sup>52</sup> I want in the remainder of this lecture to explore one way in which assurance was sought and attained by earlier generations of Baptists, and to ask if that tradition has any relevance or insight for us today – whether an indigenous tradition might be a source of renewal for our denomination, alongside the wider traditions from which we have been so grateful to learn.

I noted in passing above that Calvin answered the demand for

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51 Indeed, I am rather too used to modern forms of 'theology' which suggest that God, if only he had thought about it as clearly as we have done, didn't ought to have done what he did, to have any patience with such arguments. To take only the most obvious of many tedious examples, it has been rather fashionable over the last century to be scandalised by the particularities of the incarnation, whether objecting to the fact that God chose to be born as a Jewish human being (the common complaint in the first half of the twentieth century) or objecting to the fact that God chose to be born as a male human being (the common complaint in the second half).

52 Further reason may be found in the failure of atheism to make any really significant impact upon the general population; the best data seems to suggest that less than 15% of people are prepared to own the term, and that this figure is static or declining. Questioning the existence of God is not only a peculiarly modern and Western obsession; even within that particular culture, it is confined to universities and what are disparagingly known as 'the chattering classes'.

assurance of God's favour with a doctrine of election. I suspect the reason for this was his awareness of the abuse of the medieval tradition of finding assurance through the sacramental life of the church, but in fact his account of the nature of sacrament was sufficiently robust that, had he chosen to continue to link assurance with participation in the sacraments, he could have done so, theologically.<sup>53</sup> Whilst the Anglican Church remained Calvinist, it too looked to a knowledge of one's place amongst the elect as the root of assurance;<sup>54</sup> interestingly, there is considerable evidence that, for the first century of its existence at least, the Baptist movement was more 'catholic' than the traditions which gave it birth.

These positions are not, of course, exclusive. It is easy to construct a combined account, whereby the providential fact of my having come to baptism is necessary and sufficient evidence of my election,<sup>55</sup> or perhaps the one sign of godliness, both necessary and infallible, which may support the minor premise of a practical syllogism, is a request to be baptized. Indeed, given that belief in predestination has been Catholic dogma since the condemnation of the semi-Pelagianism of John Cassian and others at the Second Council of Orange in 529 AD, and that this was reaffirmed in the ninth-century disputes at Corbie associated particularly with Gottschalk, it seems likely that medieval accounts of the assurance given by participation in the sacramental system at least implicitly assume some such mediating position. In post-Reformation England, however, such positions were effectively unavailable, since 'baptismal regeneration' was one of the things all good Calvinistic Protestants, and particularly those who identified with the Puritan party, knew they did not believe in. Thus the labyrinthine debates over what a well-formed

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53 See particularly *Institutes* IV.xvii.10.

54 I have given some pointers to evidence for this contention above; it is also interesting to note that the Anglican delegates to the Synod of Dort, to the extent that they had a position distinct from the common mind of that council, wanted to stress the utility of predestinarian doctrine in giving assurance. Again, the practical syllogism is, famously, formulated by Perkins, not in the Reformed academies of Geneva or Saumur.

55 'Necessary' is harder here than 'sufficient', as the passion narratives would teach us in their account of the penitent thief.

practical syllogism looked like were inevitable.

For the nascent Baptist movement, however, such concerns might have been less powerful. Not only was there a strong Arminian strand to the movement, but claims to exclusivity (i.e., that only members of Baptist churches are members of Christ's church), which are not uncommon, more-or-less imply at least coincidence between God's election and the human act of coming to believers' baptism. Finally, it is clear that, for the early Baptists, and also Separatists, membership in a gathered church was at least an important means of grace, if not an infallible mark of election. Given that such membership began in baptism, and that its most visible sign was participation in the eucharist, Baptist ecclesial practices encouraged a more sacramental theology of assurance than was usual amongst Reformation churches of that day. An attentive study of early Baptist writers demonstrates that this invitation to link assurance of God's favour with participation in the sacraments was embraced.

'Generally speaking,' claims Philip Thompson, in a study on this theme,<sup>56</sup> 'the Baptists regarded the sacraments as the means of grace appointed by God to strengthen and increase the faith of believers, and so urged diligent attendance on and use of them.' This assertion is supported with extensive references to the seventeenth-century confessions, Helwys, Smyth, Kiffin, Keach, Bunyan, Grantham, and others. As part of his argument, Thompson helpfully determines the precise meaning of the word 'seal', commonly applied to the sacraments by seventeenth-century Baptists (it is used by Smyth, Keach and Bunyan, as well as by the 'Orthodox Creed').<sup>57</sup> A seal, in this sense, is not a 'mere sign,' but the authentication of a promise. As Amesius, no doubt known to many of the early Baptists, put it, a 'bare sign only represents something. A seal not only represents but presents something by

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56 Philip Thompson, 'Toward Baptist Ecclesiology in Pneumatological Perspective' (PhD thesis, Emory University, 1995); p. 70. A revised form of this thesis should soon appear in the Paternoster *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* series.

57 Thompson, pp. 78-9.

sealing'<sup>58</sup>. God's favour is presented to his people, and the fact of being baptized and the practice of partaking of the supper are alike visible confirmations that the gift has been made. Thompson quotes one of Keach's hymns:

And for a Sign the Sacraments  
Thou didst likewise ordain,  
That we might see thy true intent  
And never doubt again.<sup>59</sup>

God gives the sacraments that his people might 'never doubt again'. A clearer statement of a doctrine of sacramental assurance would be difficult to imagine.

The seventeenth-century confessions make similar points. The Amsterdam Confession of 1611, probably written by Smyth and Helwys, carefully indicates that union with Christ, and with other members of the church, is a consequence of baptism.<sup>60</sup> The 1644 London Confession, signed in its various editions by Kiffen and Knollys, amongst others, first describes baptism as a 'sign', which is an ambiguous word, but goes on to assert that 'as certainly as the body is buried under water and risen again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ...'<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Cox's appendix to the second (1646) edition of this confession is more pointed still about baptism: 'Christ makes this ordinance a mean[s] of unspeakable benefit to the believing soul (Acts

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58 William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (tr. J.D. Eusden) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997) XXXVI.9. On this point in the Puritan writers more generally, see Gordon S. Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety* (London: Epworth, 1957) pp. 37-54.

59 Thompson, p. 79.

60 Article 10 asserts 'That the church of Christ is a company of faithful people, separated from the world by the word and Spirit of God, being knit unto the Lord, and one unto another, by baptism...' The parallelism is surely deliberate, and suggests that baptism is at least the instrumental cause of union with Christ. Text from E.B. Underhill, *Confessions of Faith* (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854) p. 6.

61 Article XL (Underhill, p. 42).

2:38; Rom. 6:3,4; I Pet. 3:21).<sup>62</sup> The 'Orthodox Creed', as well as using the language of 'seal' noted above, will go so far as to assert 'as they [the people of Israel] had the manna to nourish them in the wilderness of Canaan, so we have the sacraments, to nourish us in the church and in our wilderness condition, until we come to heaven.'<sup>63</sup> Finally, the 1689 Second London Confession, signed by so many significant Baptist leaders, talks of baptism only in the language of 'sign', but insists that the supper is effective in 'confirmation' of faith and its benefits in believers,<sup>64</sup> and that it is a means of 'spiritual nourishment' and growth in Christ.<sup>65</sup> It goes on to echo the language of the Westminster divines in insisting that '[w]orthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporately, but spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified.'<sup>66</sup>

It would seem, then, that not only are there good theological reasons to suppose that the Baptists were more open to a sacramental account of assurance than other Protestant groups of the seventeenth century, but also that every significant Baptist confession of the period taught such an account. I have also indicated evidence that where the 1689 Confession altered the wording of the Westminster and Savoy documents on which it was based, it did so in a sacramentalist direction. Further evidence would be tiresome: Baptists, in their origin, were sacramentalists. Keach taught them to sing:

Bread does renew the strength of Men  
Who ready are to faint;

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62 Article XVI (Underhill, p. 57).

63 Article XIX (Underhill, p. 140).

64 The Westminster and Savoy originals spoke here of 'sealing'; the Baptist change makes the language less amenable to a non-sacramentalist interpretation.

65 Article XXX.1 (Underhill, p.227).

66 Article XXX.7 (Underhill, p. 228).

O then on Christ let's feed agin,  
Eat bread poor drooping saint.<sup>67</sup>

- and his theology is as powerful as his poetry is execrable.<sup>68</sup>

Going beyond the seventeenth century, I do not propose to take in an exhaustive survey of Baptist history, but let me at least briefly notice the opinions of two significant figures. I am not claiming that they are representative, but they do at least demonstrate that a sacramentalist account of assurance has been an available position for Baptists more recently in history. In the nineteenth century, Robert Hall of Cambridge, who had added great lustre to the church which I began by describing, held such strongly sacramental views that Payne was moved to describe them as 'almost more Lutheran than Calvinist.'<sup>69</sup> Hall would say the relationship of Spirit baptism to water baptism was that of effect to cause,<sup>70</sup> and would claim that in communion we are 'actual partakers in faith of the body and blood of the Redeemer offered on the Cross.'<sup>71</sup> Michael Walker has demonstrated that Charles Haddon Spurgeon's view of the Eucharist was similar to Calvin's, involving a real spiritual feeding on Christ.<sup>72</sup> As a result, Spurgeon desired Christians to communicate weekly, because to fail to do so would be a neglect of the means of grace that God had given. His view of baptism was less sacramental, probably

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67 Quoted by Thompson, p. 76.

68 A judgement which might be reversed when nineteenth-century hymnody is in view. The tendency in the late twentieth century has often been to combine seventeenth century poetic standards with theological ones from the nineteenth. This seems unfortunate.

69 Quoted in Davies, *Worship and Theology* p. 82.

70 *Works* vol. II p. 217.

71 *Works* vol. III p. 61.

72 Michael Walker, *Baptists at the Table: The Theology of the Lord's Supper amongst English Baptists in the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1992), ch. 5.

because of a controversy over baptismal regeneration in which he was involved.<sup>73</sup>

It is in the nineteenth century, however, that Baptists largely ceased to be sacramentalists. Although Anthony Cross's fine study demonstrates that the tradition was not forgotten, even in the twentieth century,<sup>74</sup> there is a clear sense that the mood of the denomination was to view baptism as no more than an act of witness and the Eucharist as merely a memorial. It is with a certain degree of embarrassment, for instance, that I must note that W.T. Whitley, in his study of *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament*<sup>75</sup> argues strongly for a thoroughly non-sacramentalist position.

This drift away from sacramentalism occurs across the Free Churches in the nineteenth century and Davies notices several possible reasons for it.<sup>76</sup> His first two are largely to do with the rise of theological liberalism: Zwinglianism, so called,<sup>77</sup> fitted better into an age that was becoming uncomfortable with anything that smacked of the supernatural; and the then-fashionable theories that Paul corrupted the pure ethical religion of Jesus into something cultic and institutional led to the suggestion that the rite Jesus instituted was a simple memorial. Thirdly, for Davies, the respect in which the Quakers and Salvationists were held suggested to many that the sacraments were no central part of Christian devotion. Fourthly, the rise of temperance movements and the changes to the common ritual removed much of the aesthetic and demonstrative power of the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>78</sup> To these reasons I would add

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73 See Tim Grass and Ian Randall's essay, 'C.H. Spurgeon on the Sacraments' in Anthony Cross (ed.) *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, forthcoming).

74 Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001).

75 London: Kingsgate Press, 1903.

76 *Worship and Theology* pp. 83-4.

77 Recent scholarship seems to argue that Zwingli was more sacramental than the theory that bears his name might suggest.

78 I make no liturgical proposals in this lecture but, to the extent this point is valid, it surely challenges us to reshape our liturgies so that God's people are not taught to devalue God's gifts. A serious liturgy, offering thanks to God for his works of

a fifth: the rise of the Oxford Movement pushed many in the Evangelical Free Churches away from any appreciation of the sacraments, because any form of sacramentalism smacked of popery.

Finally, Philip Thompson has offered a more theological account of the reasons for the loss of the sacramental tradition. Although focused on American Baptist life, this might be instructive here. Thompson suggests that the theological genius of the early Baptists lay in an account of God's freedom: freedom from all bounds, but also freedom to use whatever means he might choose. The sacraments were his chosen means. In the nineteenth century, an individualism arose that was culturally in tune with the times and theologically could be linked to great evangelical and Baptist distinctives of the need for conversion, response and freely-chosen baptism. As a result of this development, the idea of 'soul competency' became viewed as the heart of Baptist polity.<sup>79</sup> Soul competency placed a pseudo-romantic inner-decision at the heart of faith, to which baptism could only be a witness and communion a useful, but unnecessary, support.

These reasons are, I suggest, interesting, in that at most one of them, when analysed soberly, offers anything that could be considered to be a good reason for the demise of sacramentalism amongst Baptists. Whatever our estimation of the gains and losses bequeathed to the Christian tradition by nineteenth-century liberalism, the thesis that Paul corrupted and hellenized the simple ethical doctrine of Jesus has been utterly implausible since Schweitzer at least, and so any change made on that basis must be regarded as illegitimate. Even if we ignore the perhaps rather less glorious recent history of the Quaker movement, and the creation of what are commonly regarded as ersatz sacraments by the

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creation and redemption, recalling the events of the upper room, calling the people to repair their relationships, and asking God to send his Spirit, is a minimal requirement, pastorally. Equally, our departure from the practice of Jesus and our forefathers in using a single cup, and filling it with wine, borders on the inexcusable.

79 Thompson tells this story in his third chapter, pp. 173-301.

Salvation Army,<sup>80</sup> respect for the piety of non-sacramental traditions is hardly a good reason to deny sacramentalism: one of the chief lessons of inter-religious dialogue over the last few decades has been that virtue and orthodoxy do not stand in any straightforward relationship. The unworthiness of reshaping traditional Baptist theology for fear of being thought too papist hardly needs pointing out.<sup>81</sup> Finally, to whatever extent Thompson's analysis does apply to British Baptist life, he follows it by suggesting many good reasons for regarding the loss of the older doctrine and the rise of the newer as something of a theological disaster, a judgement to which recent events in the Southern Baptist Convention can only lend weight.

This leaves just one possible reason to rejoice in the triumph of Zwinglianism: alongside implausible theories about the role of Paul, the nineteenth-century liberal consensus was uncomfortable with supernaturalism, and instead taught of a wholly immanent God. If this is regarded as a theological advance, then so is the discarding of traditional accounts of sacramental assurance. There was much that was good in nineteenth-century theology, but I have to say that I regard this particular move as a mistake. In its debased form, this is easy to demonstrate: the argument, still occasionally heard, that people find it difficult to believe in the supernatural, and so we should downplay or discard the supernatural element in Christianity, clearly has no validity. Quite apart from the implausibility of the major premise,<sup>82</sup> St Paul's reasons for suggesting that the fact that the gospel appeared to be 'foolishness to the Greeks' was no argument for changing it are still convincing.

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80 Saluting the flag, the penitents' bench, and so on, are recognized as fulfilling the same role as the sacraments even by many Salvationists. See, for instance, Phil Needham, *Community in Mission: A Salvationist Ecclesiology* (London: Salvation Army, 1987), where kneeling at the 'mercy seat' is explicitly equated to baptism on pp. 8-11.

81 If sacramentalist doctrines are wrong, they were wrong before the conversion of Newman, and that event does not make them any more wrong.

82 Most people, if polls, television viewing figures, and bestseller lists are to be believed, find belief in ghosts, UFOs, fortune telling, astrology – and, these days, various forms of 'alternative therapy', the power of crystals, and so on – remarkably easy to believe in.

Liberalism may, however, be read as a positive theological proposal: real theological advances can chime with the prevailing culture, because sometimes cultural change might enable us to see things in the gospel narrative that were always there, but that we never noticed before. The humanity of God in Christ points towards God's ways of working with, in and through the world, rather than the old supernaturalism which assumed that God acted on the world from outside. Such a theological stance may be thought to give warrant for a shift in belief from sacramentalism to Zwinglianism. There is not space here to give a critique of such a theological proposal, but let me make two observations.

First, in British church life more generally, if not specifically in Baptist life, it is not the case that liberalism and a rejection of sacramental theology have gone hand-in-hand. For a variety of reasons, some no doubt sociological, others clearly theological, the liberal tradition has often preserved a fairly 'high' view of the sacraments. This suggests that, even if we find the liberal re-orientation of theology to be convincing, that in itself is not sufficient warrant to deny the old sacramental theology. The intellectual and spiritual vitality of liberal Anglo-Catholicism, the tradition that produced *Lux Mundi, Essays and Reviews*, and a leader of the stature of William Temple, is surely sufficient testament to this point.

Second, the major theological theme I have been working with is the question of assurance. The sheer variety of theological programmes which claim to be based on supposedly 'universal' aspects of human experience might suggest that building theology on experience is precarious; but *a posteriori* arguments from experience do, clearly, have a place in theology. If a theology is not liveable, it is not tenable. I suggest that the question of assurance demonstrates that traditional immanentist nineteenth-century liberalism proved not to be liveable.<sup>83</sup>

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83 As Joseph Haroutunian wrote in 1930, 'Good and intelligent Christians discarded ... Calvinism with little remorse. They were busy men, proclaiming the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of men, and the moral ideal set up by the "gentle Jesus"; telling men of the dignity and value of the human soul, its potential likeness to the perfectly good God, and its ultimate destiny in heaven. They were urging men to believe in "God, freedom and immortality", to be good,

Assurance of God's favour was, in this tradition, necessarily found in accounts of the basic goodness and brotherhood of human beings, which enabled us to speak with confidence of the fatherhood and the benevolence of God. After the 1914-18 war, this position ceased to be generally convincing, and so the theological tradition seemed unable to offer any account of assurance.<sup>84</sup>

I suggest, then, that there was no good reason to discard the old Baptist tradition of teaching a real work of God in the sacraments and thus deducing assurance of God's favour from the fact of being baptized and continuing participation in the communion service. This tradition slipped from view through a combination of erroneous theology, factionalism and improper accommodation to the prevailing moods of the culture. Its disappearance, I suggest, was a real and genuine loss from our Baptist life, so serious as to have perhaps occasioned more pastoral crises than any other theological shift in our history. Pastors were left with no convincing way of assuring worried people of God's good favour towards them, and no absence can be more damaging to the work of pastoral ministry – this is, after all, fundamentally the loss of the gospel, the good news that through the work of Jesus we can call God 'Father' without fear of rebuke or rejection.

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to do good, and to live in peace with their fellowmen. They preached these things, and expected men to believe and practice them. They were great optimists.' Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety vs Moralism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

84 The famous 'bomb in the playground of the liberal theologians' was, I suggest, dropped not by Barth, but by Wilhelm II, Herbert Asquith, and the rest. Barth's disillusionment with the liberal tradition of his teachers was perhaps perceptive only in its rapidity, and his great commentary on *Romans* did not destroy liberalism, but merely indicate ways in which Christian faith might survive after liberalism's collapse.

## A MODEST PASTORAL PROPOSAL

I have suggested that the various strands of renewal with which I began this lecture contain within them a quest for reliable and incontrovertible experience of God, which is itself a way to find precisely this assurance. Let me further suggest that they are all destined to failure, twice over: there are good reasons to suppose that they will not provide the reliable experience of God that is being sought; and even if they did it would not, rightly considered, be a sufficient pastoral answer to the problem of assurance.

The latter point is easier to argue. Any account of assurance of God's favour on the evidence of religious experience is vulnerable to the devastating criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach argued that, unless we already have good reason to believe in the existence of a good and trustworthy God, there is no good reason to suppose that reality is shaped according to our most fundamental experiences and desires, so no logically convincing argument from the fact of religious experience to the favour, or even existence, of God can be constructed.<sup>85</sup> Thus, if it were not the case that God both existed and was omnibenevolent, it would remain a possibility that our experiences either happened to be misleading or were deliberately falsified by some powerful evil entity, and so they could not be sufficient evidence to convince us of God's benevolence. Feuerbach's statement is particularly fine in demonstrating the point in relation to the modern situation, but the argument should be obvious to anyone with an acquaintance with Descartes' *Meditations*; it is just his famous demon in a slightly different form, after all.<sup>86</sup>

This argument, incidentally, is at the root of much modern critique of religious belief. It is employed variously by Marx, Freud, and several members of the Huxley clan. Marx states that with it, the criticism of religion is complete, and sees the only explanation for the persistence of devotion as the fact that religion makes the inhumanity of capitalism

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85 *The Essence of Christianity* appendix §§1-3.

86 See *Meditations* I.

bearable – the ‘opium of the people,’ famously.<sup>87</sup> A communist society will have no need for religion, because it will have done away with inhuman behaviour.<sup>88</sup> The most common modern form of the same argument relies on Richard Dawkins’s account of memetics, and was first stated, I think, in *The Selfish Gene*.<sup>89</sup> If one takes our experience of the universe as the determinative evidence, then atheism is a plausible, and even logical, position. The implausibility – irrationality may not be too strong – here lies in the initial premise.

Returning to the former point, I suggested that there are good reasons to suppose that the various renewal movements active in Baptist life currently will not provide reliable experience of God. Lest I be misunderstood, let me stress once again that this is not to deny that these movements are worthwhile and valuable: there is much that is good in each of them, and I wish every success to those who promote them. I merely think that their current employment might be compared to people someone being recommended to drink single malt whisky to cure backache: following the advice will enrich their life greatly in many ways, but it is unlikely to do anything for their back. Just so, a discipline of contemplative prayer, annual Celtic pilgrimages, regular exercise of charismatic gifts, or a study and use of the songs of the world church will each do us much good, but will not guarantee us reliable experience of God.

This position could be argued by examining each of the renewal traditions and demonstrating that it contains within itself the admission of the point. To take only the most obvious case, the constant descriptions within the great texts of contemplative spirituality of the

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87 See ‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’ in Gregor Bontor (tr.) *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) pp. 243-5.

88 It is difficult not to be reminded of the old joke to the effect that the problem with capitalism is that man oppresses his fellow man, whilst in communism precisely the reverse takes place.

89 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: OUP, 1989<sup>2</sup>) pp. 192-3; those familiar only with this version of the argument should be aware that Feuerbach’s original statement (and indeed Marx’s restatement) is rather more intellectually convincing than Dawkins.

experience most commonly denominated the 'dark night of the soul', and the linked emphatic assertions that this does not betoken abandonment by God, but instead a growing closer to him, make it almost impossible to construct an account of the spiritual life that is in any way in continuity with this root tradition yet attempts to claim that successful practice will inevitably and reliably result in experience of God. Similar arguments could, I am confident, be sketched for each of the renewal movements I have identified. I do not, however, intend to do this: it would only be an invitation to find other roots of renewal, and even if the argument could be made for each one, an infinite number of arguments would be needed finally to prove the point.

Instead, let me sketch three arguments, one exegetical and the other two theological, to suggest that, if God is as he is described by the Christian gospel, he will never grant reliable experience of himself to practitioners of any spiritual technique. By 'reliable' here, I mean experience that will be sufficiently compelling to form the minor premise of an 'existential syllogism', taking the form: whoever has a particular experience of God is beloved of God; but I have this experience; therefore I am beloved of God. It seems to me, based on a comparison with some of the Puritan discussions over the practical syllogism, on which I have of course modelled my novelty, that amongst the conditions that must be fulfilled for experience to be considered reliable are the impossibility of counterfeiting, and the availability of the experience at any time on demand – the latter because it is of the nature of human experience to become less clear in the memory, and so the syllogism will become steadily less convincing over time, unless the evidence can be renewed whenever necessary.<sup>90</sup>

The first such argument might be to suggest that the narratives of Scripture do not anywhere describe a spiritual life that contains such reliable experience of God.<sup>91</sup> The point is made powerfully by such

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90 I am (uncomfortably) aware that almost every clause of this paragraph needs definition and defence – 'Had we but world enough and time...' – but I am confident that the broad lines of the account I sketch could be sustained.

91 I believe the same to be true of the narratives of tradition, but the terms of reference of this lecture permit me to confine myself to arguments which assume the validity of the BUGB Declaration of Principle, or so I assume.

Psalms as 42, 63 and 88, but perhaps more convincingly by the narratives of Abraham and Job. That God appeared to Abraham when God chose to, and not when Abraham desired it is a theme of the text of Genesis; Job's righteousness was not sufficient to save him from Satan's attack upon the experiential evidences of God's blessing – his wealth and family – an attack made with God's full knowledge and permission, according to the text. The most decisive testimony, however, is the evidence of the gospels, and particularly the accounts of temptation and passion.

The temptation narratives describe the result of the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus, which is hunger, thirst, exhaustion and temptation.<sup>92</sup> The gospels, as almost always, are silent about the inner psychology of Jesus, and so we are forced to infer the existence of any experience of God that he may have been given. The evidence seems to me to point to its absence, however: the temptations are met with citations from the levitical laws, not with any claim to reserves of inner strength or insight, and the appearance of the angels at the end of the narrative (in Matthew and Mark's tellings, at least) would seem to indicate the return of an awareness of God's presence, with the physical, psychological and spiritual benefits that it brings. This is conjecture, however; more telling is the description of the death of Jesus in the first two gospels.

The cry of dereliction ('my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') has recently been the cause of a certain amount of embarrassment amongst evangelical commentators. If we assume that experience of God is the essence of spiritual life, and indeed that experience is the measure of all reality, then the suggestion that at one point in his life Jesus lacked any awareness – experience – of God's presence with him does rather strike at the doctrine of the incarnation. If, however, we recognize the flaws in such premises, there is no reason to suppose that the hypostatic union was damaged by Jesus' inability to sense it in the last hours of his life, any more than it was by his inability to articulate it in its first hours. Taking the text at face value, then, there was at least one point in Jesus' life where he had no experience of God's benevolence, and where no

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92 I have seen little reference to this rather obvious exegetical point in charismatic literature, for some reason, although several demonstrations of it in the lives of charismatic Christians.

memory of previous experience was enough to assure him. This should lead us to conclude that experience is not an adequate place in which to locate our assurance.

A theological argument might rely on the traditional reluctance within Christian spirituality to any account of perfection being achieved in this life.<sup>93</sup> The necessary reliability of the hypothetical experience I am describing, in particular, might be seen as offending against this tradition. All things are being brought to perfection by God, including explicitly our knowledge of him and his works (I Cor. 13:12), the comfort and hope we derive from that knowledge (Rev. 21:4), and the fullness of redemption in various ways (Rom. 8; Eph. 1), but that perfection will not be achieved this side of the eschaton; neither, then, can we say that we may hope to achieve such holiness, and such proficiency in a particular spiritual technique, that our experience of God will be reliable. Notice that this argument finally depends on an account of the eschatological nature of the consummation of divine action. Given this, If we accept the suggestion of St Basil, that the particular form of unity of the works of the Trinity consists of the Father initiating each divine work, the Son executing it, and the Spirit bringing it to eschatological perfection,<sup>94</sup> then such an account is not merely based on historical prejudices in the Christian tradition, but on a fundamental statement of who God is.

The second theological argument concerns the freedom of God, which Thompson identified as the central Baptist distinctive in the early decades of the movement.<sup>95</sup> Simply stated, God is not bound to techniques of any form, and so no technique can provide the necessary reliability of experience. God simply does not give himself to order like that, and to teach otherwise would be to reinvent the worst excesses of

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93 Even the 'Christian perfection' (or, better, 'Scriptural holiness') that Wesley believed was the particular charism of the Methodists is so hedged with qualifications that it does not serve as a counter-example to this assertion. See John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Brief Thoughts Concerning Christian Perfection, &c.*

94 On the Holy Spirit XVI.37-8.

95 Thompson, ch. 1.

priestcraft, the assumption that God's blessings are somehow imprisoned within human activities.

This argument might seem to be in danger of proving too much: if God is not bound to anything, then there is no possibility of assurance. A deity who was simply capricious, after all, might choose to condemn his most devoted follower to perdition on a whim. Thompson, however, suggests that the early Baptists had an answer to this: God is also free to make promises, by which he chooses to be bound. The difference between a promise and a technique lies in the graciousness of the former: technical ability suggests reflex action, that God is constrained by some law of his being to react in such-and-such a way to such-and-such a stimulus. Thus, the experience that is the result of the hypothetical technique that I have been discussing is not something God chooses to give, but something that is demanded – deserved, earned – by the technician, if only she performs her task skilfully enough. God's promise, by contrast, demands nothing of the applicant: since the promise itself is already the result of, and sufficient evidence of, God's gracious benevolence, we may trust and hope that even defects in the manner of claiming the promise will be winked at or made up by the boundless mercy of the Triune Lord.

Because of this, the result of a promise does not need to be an experience. That is, if my assurance of God's favour rests on the correct performance of a technique, then I will need some demonstration that my performance has been correct – an experience. In a time of ministry, the confidence that God is answering the prayers of those chosen for their technical skill in prayer ministry comes from either their experience – a word, a picture, or 'hot hands' – or from their client's experience – shaking, falling, or whatever. Speaking in tongues functions in precisely this way within the Pentecostal tradition, as a guarantee that the attempt to achieve baptism in the Spirit has been successful. By contrast, if I have a clear promise from God, then the promise itself is sufficient proof of its own fulfilment, and the fact that I experience nothing is no evidence that the promise is not to be fulfilled – a point made regularly by those who are privileged to lead others in a prayer of repentance and commitment at the beginning of their Christian life.

So, finally, an account of assurance based on sacramentalism does not demand that people have any particular experience in receiving the sacraments. The promise of God that he will meet us in the bath, and when we share the loaf and the cup,<sup>96</sup> is sufficient, if we understand the promise aright. When Luther based his confidence on the claim ‘baptismus sum’ he was simply correct; equally, the fact of receiving bread and wine is adequate proof of our part in the redemption won by Christ, regardless of our feelings when approaching the table.<sup>97</sup> Theologically, the argument is complete. Pastorally, however, there is still the question of how God’s people are taught to gain assurance from God’s promises.

This should not be difficult. Indeed, my partial and anecdotal observations suggest that, even in the face of years of misguided pastors telling people to find assurance elsewhere and trying their utmost to evacuate the Eucharistic celebration of any content at all.<sup>98</sup> God’s people still know instinctively that it is in bread and wine that God meets them most powerfully. The problem, however, is those of tender consciences, which is, or should be, us all from time to time, who are concerned about their place in God’s favour. For such the question of assurance is acute and desperate. They may benefit greatly from a retreat or a time of ministry: God is, after all, unbelievably gracious – a motto under which all our pastoral work must take place. We all know, however, that they may not. Will a communion service help? Unsupported by any teaching, again, it might: God may be gracious here, too, and give an unlooked-for sign of his goodness and grace. The need is, however, as always, for people to be taught the gospel promises our forefathers knew: God in Christ meets us by his Spirit in bath and supper, and binds us to himself.

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96 And, I would add, when the book is read and preached.

97 To ‘eat and drink unworthily’ in the context of I Cor. 11 is to eat and drink without ‘recognising the body of the Lord’ (v. 29), rather than any more general sinfulness. The primary reference must be to the sacrament itself, I think, but the passage also demands a reference to the fellowship of the church – ‘you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.’

98 I have attended communion services at Baptist churches which did not include a reference to the events of Calvary or to the words of institution, even in a paraphrased or sung form.

We may hope and pray that people who have been taught that will believe it when it most matters.

The teaching is there, even in modern Baptist material, if we look for it. Let me quote to you from various parts of the communion material found in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship*: 'The risen Christ is present among his people and it is here that we meet him;' 'this Supper ... is an encounter with the risen Lord;' 'Come and meet the risen Christ, for we are his body;' 'feed us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ your Son;' 'fill us with your Spirit, that as we share this bread and this wine we may feed on the body and blood of Christ, and be empowered for service;' 'we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ;' 'You have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth. You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service;' and, of course, the words of Jesus are recalled several times, 'if anyone eats this bread, they will live for ever.' I will not bore you with a similar list from the baptismal material, but the statement of what baptism is contains the assertion, 'they are washed free of sin.' The book is in no way binding, of course, but it gives me hope both that what I am suggesting is not too far from where the denomination is, and that God's people have heard the truth taught, even if their shepherds did not know it.

Again, let me stress that I am only criticising one use to which the various traditions of renewal have been put, not the traditions themselves. Indeed, I hope they grow and spread. If we Baptists can discover the riches of worship that our brothers and sisters across the world know, that can only be for the good; the treasury of devotion, and the patterns of Christian community in everyday life, that are being discovered in Celtic and contemplative traditions will benefit many of us; finally, when God speaks to us in prophecy or offers his miracles of healing, how could we possibly respond with anything other than grateful worship? If, however, we look in these places for an assurance of God's favour, we will only be disappointed, and will be in danger of despising these good gifts of God.

And so, I return to where I started: complaints about tradition, demands for renewal. Hungry, hurting people running from one promised solution to the next. What are we to say to them? If we are to

be faithful to the Scriptures, and to our Baptist tradition; if we are to be theologically orthodox and pastorally wise, might I suggest one thing, and one thing only:

    Come to this sacred table, not because you must, but because you may.

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