

Doing Theology in a Baptist Way

A SHORT DECLARATION of the mystery of iniquity.

Jer. 41. 6.

Flee out of the midst of Babel, and deliver
every man his soule, be not destroyed in her
iniquity, for this is the time or the
lords vengeance, he will render
vnto her a recompense.

Hosea 10. 12.

Sow to your selues in right eoulnes reape
after the measure of mercie, breake vp your
fallow ground, for it is time to seeke
the lord, till he come & raine
righteoulnes vpon you.



Anno 1612.

Paul S. Fiddes (editor)
Brian Haymes
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Whitley Publications
Oxford
2000

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ISBN 09528150 9 5

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This book is published with the assistance of funds from the Whitley Committee, with additional subsidies from Bristol Baptist College, Northern Baptist College, Regent's Park College and Spurgeon's College.

Published by: Whitley Publications
Regent's Park College, Oxford OX1 2LB

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Preface

The essays in this collection were prompted by a particular event. In 1999, as the Principals of the four Baptist colleges in England, we believed we should call together a theological consultation of a particular sort. This would not be the usual meeting of professional theological teachers in universities and theological colleges – though these would not be unwelcome. Rather, we wanted to gather together Baptists who were doing theology in their own context of pastoral practice, whether as ordained ministers or as other kinds of church leaders and workers. They might be studying for a further degree in theology part-time, or just working at some theological theme, driven by their own interests and as part of their ministry. We knew that there were many such ministers and others among us; in talking to them we discerned a growing desire to meet together to share concerns. We wanted to listen to them, and to allow them to listen to each other. We called the consultation ‘Doing Theology in a Baptist Way’, and this is also the title of this booklet.

About forty-five participants gathered in Regent’s Park College, Oxford, from 16-20 August 1999, many taking their summer holiday time to be there; nearly as many again expressed great interest and regretted that they were not able to come. Most of the consultation was occupied by the participants themselves reading papers to each other, sharing the theological work they were doing with a wider audience. There was a widespread feeling that it had been an affirming experience, giving the opportunity to exchange theological ideas freely in an atmosphere of acceptance and trust. At the end there was a unanimous wish to repeat the event, which will happen in Luther King House, Manchester, during the period 20-24 August 2001. Further, there was a wish to keep the members of this community of theological reflection in contact with each other between meetings; an informal and open grouping was thus given an identity under the name ‘Baptists doing Theology in Context – A Continuing Consultation’.

Many of the papers given have now been published. Some, for example, have appeared in the *Baptist Ministers’ Journal*, and others in the *Baptist Quarterly*. A collection has also been brought together in an ‘occasional journal’ titled *Theology in Context* (edited with an introduction by Steve Holmes),

and a full list of all the papers offered in Oxford is appended both to the journal and to this booklet. It is hoped to produce further editions of the journal after the Manchester Consultation.

The papers in the present collection belong in this setting. We thought that we should offer our own thoughts about the theme of the consultation, and the written pieces here are slightly revised and fuller versions of papers we gave on that occasion. We imagine then that the audience for the written pieces will also be those interested in doing theology, and we have allowed ourselves the indulgence of a *slightly* more academic approach than in earlier booklets produced jointly. Also in this third and last booklet produced by the four Principals (as they were at that time), all except one piece are given named authorship. This departs from our previous practice, but the nature of the event called, we thought, for us to refer quite personally and individually to our theological pilgrimages, although much of these have been a journey shared with each other.

Indeed, we have written what we think is the central piece together. What is now chapter 2 occupied the very first session of the consultation. We thought we should begin, not with a keynote address, but with a story. Three of us have shared for twenty years in a process of 'doing theology in a Baptist way', and the fourth has accompanied us for a significant part of the way. We tell this story because we want to witness to what this partnership in thinking and writing has meant to us over the years, but also in the hope that these consultations will spark off other joint projects and lead to other stories too.

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Advent 2000

Theology and Baptist identity

BRIAN HAYMES

A number of those who saw details of a consultation in Oxford on the theme 'Doing Theology in a Baptist Way', but who were unable to attend, drew attention to the same question: *is there a distinctive Baptist way of doing theology?* Some commented in ways that suggested the answer was obviously negative – so, they implied, 'let's stop chasing the wind and do something useful'. One wit offered the thought that 'Baptist theology' was itself a self-contradiction. Another replied affirmatively to the question, stating that there is indeed a distinctive Baptist way of doing theology - namely, badly.

I began to wonder whether these attempts at humour signified anything. We often make jokes or appear casual about issues to which we would rather not attend but which we realize, uncomfortably, do have their own significance. Joking acknowledges the issue but keeps it at arm's length.

Is there a distinctive Baptist way of doing theology? What kind of a question is this? And why should anyone ask it? Some might ask the question because they are denominationalistic through and through. Since such believe they are the only true Church then they must have ways of doing theology, and so arriving at *the* truth, which others do not have and which are therefore part of their denominational distinctiveness and identity. I would have been surprised to have found any of that persuasion present at the Oxford Consultation – although they can be encountered in some parts of the Baptist community expressing various forms of 'landmark-ism'.

But supposing we were not intent on such denominationalistic tribalism, would the question still have any significance? It is clearly asking more than 'are there certain topics which dominate Baptist theological thinking?'. Any survey of theses and dissertations by scholars who happen to be Baptist will give a very broad picture, as broad as the general study of theology in the

academy. There are topics that are particularly important for Baptist identity, such as ecclesiology and religious liberty for example, but I am not aware that these occupy an exclusive or even predominant place among, for example, Baptist postgraduate students. Indeed, I suspect that Baptists follow research interests in theology because they *are* interests and not because they are Baptist. I do note, however, that in exploring their particular theological concerns some do so with special reference to Baptist life and thought.

So, are the humorists right to imply that this is a dead question? All of us who have undertaken any theological research know full well that we are working in a much wider community than simply the Baptist one. Denominational loyalties, as such, hardly cross our minds. We are grateful to enter the wide field of scholarship. Here we find a kind of naturally assumed ecumenism that belongs not to the defence of party positions but to the search for deeper understandings of the truth and ways of God. We do have, of course, theologically informed Baptist historians and a continuing line of those who explore the story of Baptists. They remind us of theological emphases that have featured in this story. These historians themselves, however, are at pains to set their particular studies in the wider context of whatever religious, social and political changes are going on. Their contribution is of particular but not exclusive denominational interest.

Nevertheless, the fact is that the reality of denominations remains with us. Most but not all of us who shared the Oxford Consultation are Baptists. We confront that fact with various levels of personal enthusiasm. I personally have lived with a theological tension of this denominational/ecumenical kind my entire ministry. On the one hand I am ecumenically committed. I see no serious Christian future that does not take the ecumenical calling seriously. There is in the end only one holy catholic and apostolic church and many of us pray that it may come to expression on earth.

But, on the other hand, I find that the more I am drawn into ecumenical discussions, particularly on the nature of the church and its ministry, then as a matter of conviction, I remain a Baptist. It is in these terms that I am concerned about Baptist identity, not as a denominationalist standing over against the rest of the church, but as one who holds that certain insights which have been important in the Baptist story remain significant for the whole church of God, called to share the divine purpose. Among those convictions I would name: the gathered church, the priesthood of all believers, the absolute authority of God in Christ, believers' baptism, the call to faithful corporate

discipleship, and religious freedom. I do not claim that Baptists are the only people who hold some or all of these affirmations but I would argue that there are ways of holding and living these affirmations together which are important and that, at their best, Baptists have tried to do. I believe I see a connection between what I call Baptist identity and what I recognize as authentic Christian identity. Of course, this may simply be a circular argument. But a church, for example, that seeks to impose its will on the rest of society is not simply taking an unbaptist approach; it is less than Christian.

Is there a distinctive Baptist way of doing theology? In the first place there are, I think, certain 'Baptist distinctives' and these are always in need of serious theological reflection and expression by Baptists and others. I am convinced that this kind of theological study must be done in ecumenical partnership.

These Baptist 'distinctives' usually focus on ecclesiology. While there may be no distinctive Baptist doctrine of God, of creation, salvation or consummation, it is none the less the case that Baptists have their own kind of interest in such affirmations of faith. For example, the doctrine of God in Trinity, some of us would claim, has its own implications for an ecclesiology which is cautious about hierarchies and strong on fellowship, love and belonging. Again, the way Baptists come at questions of authority in the church and state have their own theological undergirding. It is true that some try to argue that only one particular doctrine of the Bible and its interpretation is Baptist, but they have little support in history for such a view and one suspects that non-theological factors are really driving the arguments, or more accurately, affirmations.

But is there anything beyond these Baptist distinctives? Is there a way of *doing* theology that relates to these Baptist principles, and can these principles shape a particular way of approach to theology? That question does interest me. I want to suggest, albeit in general terms, that Baptist distinctives do imply a way of doing theology. I shall try to express this through four related affirmations.

First, Baptists, holding to the believers' Church tradition, have a vocation to a theology which is always being renewed. If it is God who gathers the church then we cannot but be interested in God, in seeking God's mind and doing God's will. Given that we are unwilling to make creeds authoritative, and that we hold, as a matter of theological principle, that each church has liberty in the Spirit to interpret and administer Christ's laws, then each new

generation must work at its theology as reflection upon practice. It is part of its vocation. It is an expression of our love for God. It is the task of a people baptized into the mission of the triune God. It is not enough simply to ask how we can get the gospel across – we have to keep asking together what the Good News of God *is*. In this sense, theology must always be modern.

Second, the emphasis I have laid on enquiry ‘together’ is not without significance. The church is gathered by God, lives in and by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and is nourished by word and sacraments. It exists as a community, a gathered community that together seeks the mind of Christ. A Baptist way of doing theology is therefore unashamedly confessional and collegiate. The corporate nature of the church questions any models that are individualistic and unaccountable, a fact that has implications for our understanding of ministry and ordination. We bring our theological reflections to the test of others, and not just other theologians, but the whole people of God. The Baptist theologian is accountable not only to her academic peers but also to the gathered church.

In practice this means working with and for others, in collegiate spirit. In the preface to the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, the late James McClendon described something of his method.¹ He identified the end result as the harvest of many helpers. He mentioned those who, at his request, used drafts of part of the volume in their own teaching, in experimental classes. He wrote of those he calls *overseers* who met together with him over three years to discuss together the various drafts. And he referred to the local ‘theological circles’ which met in McClendon’s home, a house group, but one which also worked at the material in his book. The work went to publication in one scholar’s name but he was eager to recognize its collegiate community nature.

Third, I have already used the phrase ‘reflection on practice’. This might be expected, not simply because of the insights of Liberation Theology, but because of the relationship between faith and discipleship so fundamental to Baptist convictions. The process of reflection moves in two directions – from theological affirmations to the practice of their implications, and from practice to consider the verbal confession of faith.

Thus we read the Bible and allow its story to shape our life. It is not enough to deduce and then discuss theological propositions - important as that task is. There is also the business of living, of having our lives individually and corporately shaped by the story. Again, I have sympathy with

McClendon's approach here. He rejects a dull 'biblicism', an imprisonment in the understanding and practices of the past as 'word' becomes fixed law in an authoritative book; he avoids this by arguing that the church called into being today by the one triune God *is* the primitive church, *is* the followers of Jesus who bear now his commands.² The narratives construct our identity, the theology is self-involving, and active discipleship is a creative feature of it all.

Fourth and finally, since all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus Christ, then all our theologies must have a provisionality about them. We know but only in part. Tentativeness is not a mild form of sin but might be the expression of serious searching faith. Hence, in Baptist theology, there will be a recognition of plurality and we shall be properly wary of those who wish to squeeze us into their own mould. We are not very good at recognizing this, but any history of Baptist theology must include Generals and Particulars, Spurgeon and Clifford, Harvey Cox and Billy Graham. All these, like us, were and are people of their time, seeing through a glass darkly.

Again, I do not claim that all this is exclusively Baptist. Certainly I do not claim that this is all that might be brought to the doing of theology. What I do claim is that the question of whether there is a Baptist way of doing theology is not to be dismissed as a joke.

In 1964 Leonard Champion is alleged to have said at a denominational conference that Baptists live in a theological slum. I am not convinced the housing has improved over much. But I do think that working and living theologically is implicit in Baptist convictions. As McClendon puts it, theology is 'the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a [theologically] convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.' For a people called in baptism to share the mission of God we can hardly do without it.

Notes

¹ James Wm McClendon Jnr, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, *Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986).

² James Wm McClendon Jnr, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 23.

Doing theology together: 1979-1999 *A shared story*

PAUL S. FIDDES, BRIAN HAYMES, RICHARD L. KIDD,
& MICHAEL QUICKE

When we met together in 1998 to plan the programme for a theological consultation, it seemed to us that the best way to begin the event was not with a key lecture but with a story. We wanted to tell one particular story of a Baptist way of doing theology. It was *our* twenty-year story of trying to do theology from within the community of Baptist churches, for them especially but also for the churches as a whole.

Our aim from the beginning of this shared experience was to think about God and God's purposes in the world from the particular perspective of our story as Baptists, and to offer this in the first place to our churches who might well be thinking that theology was a waste of time. Second, we thought it should also make a Baptist contribution to ecumenical thinking, that the Baptist vision might well help to renew the thinking of all Christian churches in our day. Our aim at the Consultation in telling this story of our life and work together was to ask the participants to take it as a case study, to comment on it for us, and to prompt them to ask how *they* might make their own story. Now that we are writing it down for wider circulation, we hope that it might have the same effect upon those who read it.

The first chapter

Our story began twenty years ago, when Leonard G. Champion delivered a paper at the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society on *Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life*. This former Principal of

Bristol Baptist College argued that the new vitality in Baptist churches at the end of the eighteenth century sprang from a new *theological* thinking which moved beyond a dull, formal and doctrinaire Calvinism to 'evangelical Calvinism'. As expressed by Andrew Fuller and others, this change of theology retained a strong sense of the sovereignty of God, but brought it together with a belief in human responsibility to respond to the love of God. It was this that led to a new sense of the church's calling to mission, and so to new *structures* which gave expression to the mission, the chief among these being the renewal of associating, and the creation of both the Baptist Missionary Society and the Baptist Union. Fuller and others were concerned not first with structures but with the nature of God's gracious sovereignty and God's relationship to human life. Champion drew a modern parallel with this past venture:

I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new structures of church life as effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present. The formulation and propagation of such a theology is an urgent task. And it is a task for members of a younger generation as Fuller, Ryland and others were younger men. What is needed is... the theological explication of living experience in terms of the given gospel for the sake of Christian communication. In an era of varied theological argumentation, much of it unrelated to the human situation or to the deep needs of individuals and communities, this is a forbidding task requiring a combination of profound conviction, intellectual ability and knowledge, and prolonged, careful labours. But it could be a means of a living creative Word bringing new vitality and form to the denomination.¹

One of us, Brian Haymes, wrote to Dr Champion after the lecture and talked with another Baptist minister, Roger Hayden, about the implications of what had been said. A small group was gathered in response to the challenge of the lecture. In those days they could at least be called a 'younger generation'. They were Keith Clements, Paul Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Brian Haymes and Richard Kidd – three Baptist ministers in a local church pastorate, and two who were teaching in our Baptist colleges.

An opportunity for 'doing theology in a Baptist way' presented itself immediately. In 1977 the Annual Assembly of the Baptist Union had requested the council to set up 'an interdepartmental commission to examine the causes for numerical and spiritual decline in the denomination'. A report was brought to the 1979 Council and Assembly, entitled *Signs of Hope*. It was heavy on statistical analysis but almost totally devoid of any of the serious theological work for which Champion had asked.

From this context came *A Call to Mind*, a collection of essays from the five group members published in 1981. The title was deliberately related to a further document of the Baptist Union which had followed up the conclusions of *Signs of Hope*, namely *A Call to Commitment*. This latter document called for commitment to worship and pray, to evangelize, to learn, to care, to serve and to release for leadership. *A Call to Mind* was a request that before we did anything we paused to *think*. Although the book has the Baptist Union imprint it was virtually published privately, funded by the contributors and some friends.

A Call to Mind was sub-titled *Baptist Essays Towards a Theology of Commitment*, and it tried to explore such a theology. The essays were entitled 'Facing Secularism', 'The Call to Be', 'The Signs of Hope', 'The Faith and Other Faiths', and 'On Being the Church'. The group of us met on at least six occasions for the discussion of ideas and papers. We were not intent on setting out a party position and we made it clear that we did not necessarily agree with one another's way of putting things. The book hardly caused a ripple.

None the less, we had found the exercise to be a very rewarding one ourselves. The group of us continued to meet. Denominational discussions at that time revolved around the reports and the effects of Restorationism and the Charismatic Movement. Much of the comment centred upon issues of authority, leadership and the nature of the church and its mission. As a response, and trying to model the good practice suggested by Champion's lecture, a second set of essays was published in 1985 under the title *Bound to Love. The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission*.

Again, the essays were pleading for a theology adequate to our commitments and one which would enlarge those commitments. The essays were entitled 'Covenant, Old and New', 'Baptists, Covenants and Confessions', 'The Documents of Covenant Love', 'The Covenant and Community' and

'Covenant and the Church's Mission'. The book began with the claim that 'these essays are an attempt to remind Baptists of the richness of their theological inheritance, and of the urgent need to understand and utilize that inheritance responsibly in these days' and it explored the notion of covenant biblically, historically and doctrinally. Throughout, the essays kept the discussions in the denomination in mind.

Like the first book, this one began its appearance well by being commended from the platform at the Baptist Assembly. Once again, however, if these essays were read they prompted little discussion. We are not at all sure why that was. Perhaps if they had been a little more polemical there might have been a response. Theological reflection, it seems to us, was not the way forward for most Baptists who were growing increasingly pragmatic as the denominational decline in numbers continued. It is in the last couple of years that the theme of covenant has once again stirred the Baptist interest and imagination, so that the turn of the century is being marked by a 'Millennium Covenant', and by services of covenant commitment to each other in the local church, associations of churches and Union.

Our memories of the writing group at that time are full of gratitude. It was such a pleasure to have a safe place where we could think constructively. The mutual support of the group's members in friendship has remained crucial for all of us. Not only were we able to do theology together, but we felt we were modelling a way of being together which was in contrast to the competitive individualism which also marked those days.

The second chapter

In our first two collections we had mainly been writing for our own Baptist churches, addressing concerns of current Baptist life in a theological way. We hoped other churches would overhear what we were saying, but this was essentially theology for our community. When the group gathered in 1989 at Luther King House, Manchester, to ask 'where now?', we thought that we should try and write some theology in a Baptist way that would be addressed more equally to those inside and outside our Union of churches. This would be the second chapter of our story, the group at this point being still the same five from the first studies.

We had thought about the church as a covenant community, and the theme that was now gripping us was this: what does it mean to be a 'Free Church'? What is it to be a free church in a free society redeemed by a free God? This seemed to be a key point in the world-wide ecumenical debate, where we felt we had a particular witness as English Baptists, part of the Free Church movement in this country for several centuries. It keyed in with a concern for religious liberty and the danger of new forms of established church that were emerging. Drawing on the examples of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany during the 1930s, and Catholic base communities in Latin America in our age, we reflected in our discussions together on the way that a Free Church might be able to make a free society. We wrestled with the particular danger that arises in our own tradition, that a gathered church may be content to have its own kind of freedom from state control, freedom to worship and preach the gospel, and yet not be involved in the securing of wider freedoms in society. It is a Baptist peril, we thought, to say 'Jesus is *my* Lord' and not to work out the implications of affirming that 'Jesus is *the* Lord', the rightful lord over the whole of secular society. In Britain today we saw the dangers of a drift of the gathered church into privatization, losing the kind of witness given by John Clifford, who had campaigned against sweated labour, and who had his chapel windows broken by mobs angered by his stand against the imperialistic war of Britain in South Africa.

So we wrote a book about believers' baptism! This is the element of surprise in any good story. We did not write a book called – say – 'The Place of the Free Churches Today', but *Reflections on the Water*.² We thought about the way that the life and the practices of our community of faith might shape our theology, and give it a distinctive Baptist voice. If the link between the gathered community of believers and the wider rule of God in the world is the lordship of Christ (as Dietrich Bonhoeffer made very clear), then the place where for us our allegiance to Christ is focused is in the baptism of believers. It is here that we die with Christ to a life of sin and rise with him in resurrection life. It is here we are plunged into the relations of the triune God that can transform human relations. For us, baptism should open up, then, the meaning of the acts of God not only in the local church, but in society, political decision-making and in the whole of the natural world. So the full title of the book published in 1996 is *Reflections on the Water. Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers*.

The book was written out of many meetings together over six years, the sharing of draft papers, testing them against each other's reactions, and enjoying each other's company. Of the original group, Keith Clements had to leave us as he took up an international post with the Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland; his successor at Bristol Baptist College at that time, Hazel Sherman, joined us, together with Chris Ellis who was in pastoral ministry. We invited Michael Quicke, then minister in Cambridge, to become part of the group too, but at that point he was not able to do so; we did however gain from a paper he had written on the current debate on baptism.

This account should make clear that we did not set out to write a book putting the arguments for believers' baptism over against infant baptism. That would be a book *about* Baptist identity, and there is of course a place for studies like that. But this was a study written *out of* Baptist identity, encouraging all Christian churches to ask what the practice of believers' baptism tells us about the nature of God, the church and God's activity in the world. The cover of the book features one of the series of paintings entitled 'Water Lilies' by Claude Monet, showing reflections on the water. The introduction asks: as we reflect on the waters of baptism, what wider realities – of history, society, the cosmos – can we see reflected in these waters? In Monet's painting the surface of the water reflects earth and sky, as the three elements merge on the water into a visionary light. The writers hoped that the waters of baptism would become such a point of seeing how 'all things hold together in Christ.'

The opening chapter offers an introduction to the history of the practice of believers' baptism for those of our readers who might not be familiar with it. But it is not a history of *doctrine: it is an anthology of stories*. From a range of documents, it offers first-hand witness of the way that believers' baptism has *actually taken place* in a number of communities. The next essay is called 'The Sacramental Freedom of God', and takes up the historic suspicion of some of those same Baptist communities towards the word 'sacrament' with regard to baptism. It suggests that this is grounded in a typical Baptist concern to affirm the sovereign freedom of God, who is not to be trapped within any one particular means of grace in granting salvation. Accepting this, the essay urges that Baptists can nevertheless use the term 'sacrament' of baptism in a way that exactly points to the freedom of God to work through a plurality of means in our world. Freedom in society flows from the freedom of God.

The next essay, 'Baptism and Creation', builds on the idea of sacrament in the previous one, affirming that the baptism of believers allows for the fullest expression of an encounter with God through the 'stuff' of the created world. It considers five motifs connected with water which have been important for the Judaeo-Christian tradition: birth, cleansing, conflict, refreshment and journey. It argues that the baptism of believers does not merely *picture* these central, everyday experiences of being in the world; it actually enables *participation* in the creative-redemptive activity of God which is taking place in both the natural world and human community.

The following essay, called 'Baptism as a political act', takes further the image of 'conflict' which had been identified as one motif in the previous one. In plunging beneath the waters of death there is the 'shock' of confrontation with the hostile Powers which spoil life, and the candidate rises to a new life in which the Powers have been disarmed through the resurrection of Christ. In the light of this triumph, oppressive powers are to be resisted and social idols are to be overturned. This has implications for the life of the Christian community, for the Powers can only be stripped bare by a community which is really immersed into the reality of the world. So the sectarian spirit of exclusiveness, privatization, can be no part of the life of the baptized.

The following essay, called 'Baptism and the identity of Christian communities' explores further this overcoming of exclusiveness within the baptismal community. It observes that even the sign of baptism can become a means by which a group cuts itself off from others, and puts up high boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. But the baptism of believers, far from shutting people out, can help to lower the barriers while maintaining a clear Christian identity; the motif of liberation that is vividly expressed within believers' baptism can speak to many situations in our world, and enable the Christian community to reach out to the marginalized.

The sixth essay begins like the first one, by actually depicting the drama of baptism, putting the reader into the shoes of candidates waiting – sometimes nervously – for the moment of entering the water. Through this drama of baptism into the name of the Trinity we actually participate in the life of the triune God. The essay thus describes the way that we share in the life of a personal God who creates relationships, and calls us into the risky activity of mission. Believers' baptism is thus a sharing in the divine pilgrimage which

challenges all ideas of authority and control.

This summary of the essays should make clear how we had discovered together that the practice of believers' baptism allows us to shape a theology of freedom in community, with regard to the church, society and – above all – God's own sovereign communion. Moreover, the style of our doing theology was marked by being in community together. None of the essays remained the same after being shared with others, and the writers intended that as a whole they should enable the reader to see the nature of God and the world 'reflected on the water'.

Nor was this the end of the story of the writing of this book. We wanted to expand the community of discourse, or to draw others into the theological conversation. We asked a non-Baptist who had not been involved in our work to read all the finished essays and reflect upon them. We were delighted that the distinguished New Testament scholar Professor Christopher Rowland agreed to be such a friend and critic, and his own contribution therefore follows as the seventh chapter. He adopts a stance of 'critical solidarity' with the foregoing essays, but expresses his concern about the place that the child is given in a Christian community which practises believers' baptism. At first, reading this, our reaction was to say that this was the sort of traditional issue about the baptism of children that we thought we had deliberately set on one side. But as we thought about it, we came to realize that it is not possible to talk about the wider issues of God, the world and society without 'placing the child in the midst', and we were grateful for this prompting. In a concluding piece, one of us, Richard Kidd, responded to the response. This was not intended to be a riposte, but an attempt to learn from these Anglican reflections, and so to take the thought of the contributors a brief stage further. The book ends, then, on the note of a dialogue to be continued, a pilgrimage of discovery in which to share.

This then was the second stage of our own story of doing theology in a Baptist way, theology shaped by the convictions and practices of the community, and done *in* community. During this period, members of the group had been called to new responsibilities – of the original five, two of us had become Principals of our Baptist colleges for the first time, and a third had become Principal for a second time, in another college. One had become an Area Superintendent and another had taken a senior position on the European ecumenical scene. Between us we had been involved in a great deal of wider

theological discussion – with Baptists throughout the world and with other world Christian communions. Our theological discussion group was a very important part of the story of our lives at this time, and reflecting in particular on the waters of baptism gave a fundamental perspective on the many other theological conversations we were having.

The third chapter

It should be clear now that the ensuing third chapter of our story, when the group took the form of the four Principals of the English Baptist Colleges, was part of a larger story. Three members had been with the group from the beginning, and we had all been in conversation with the fourth, Michael Quicke, from earlier on. For the four of us, the task of guiding ministerial formation in our colleges could be grounded in the same experience of partnership and community as we had known already. Out of *that* new responsibility also we could do theology.

The first booklet in this new phase, *Something to Declare. A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, arose out of the process which led up to the Baptist Union's Denominational Consultation in September 1996. We had begun to meet as the four Principals of the English Baptist Colleges as early as 1994. There was a variety of good reasons which encouraged our meeting: we were already good friends, having shared theological conversation together over the years, and we soon came to value the personal and practical support we could offer each other in our particular ministries; we also shared a strong commitment to the Baptist Union and we were determined that our respective colleges should make their best possible contribution to its unfolding life. We had all long been party to continuing discussions about Baptist identity and it soon became clear that one significant contribution we could make in preparation for the coming Consultation would be a detailed study of the Union's 'Declaration of Principle'. The more we talked together the more it became clear to us that the existing Declaration of Principle – little known to many in our constituency, but formally signed by all its accredited ministers – still had a strategic role in defining our common life. We became convinced that the trajectory expressed in its opening words, 'The Basis of this Union is ...' needed to be heard afresh in any reappraisal of our continuing identity.

As earlier parts of this story make clear, we had all previously found ourselves in one way or another arguing for a fresh engagement with the potent biblical concept of 'covenant'. There we had found a concept open enough to embrace a wide variety of Christian perspectives; yet powerfully uniting us around a strong Christ-centred framework of basic convictions directed towards authentic discipleship and mission. This immediately resonated with the initiative of our then General Secretaries, David Coffey and Keith Jones, encouraging us to reflect more deeply on the idea of a 'missionary God'. In the brief, but significant, history surrounding the Declaration, we found strong evidence that in shaping this statement our Baptist forebears had striven hard to find words which would unite and sustain a wide and rich Baptist family in its life and mission. In doing this they had often run counter to those who called for a 'Confession of Faith', something which would undoubtedly have been more exclusive and greatly narrowed our sustainable breadth.

As on other occasions working together was an immensely pleasurable experience. It further deepened our friendships and enriched our shared understanding of the work we do in our diverse college settings. In addition to historical explorations, work for the booklet demanded that we revisit the now familiar themes of 'Authority', 'Baptism' and 'Mission'. Such revisitations, however, always yielded fresh insight and we were repeatedly inspired by the conversations we shared.

We were further encouraged and pleasantly surprised by the profile which our booklet received at the 1996 Baptist Assembly, and by the role it played in preparation for the September Denominational Consultation. It has continued to sell steadily, and in the Colleges we continue to use it as a significant resource in the preparation of ministers as we explore with them some distinctives of our Baptist inheritance.

That might well have marked the end of this story, had it not been for the way in which 'advice' from the Union's Consultation and subsequent discussions unfolded. By the time of the Baptist Union Council in November 1996, the denominational agenda was cluttered with reviews, reports and proposals, seemingly tangled in a confusing and complicated web. Not least amongst its many threads was a pending 'Review of the Colleges' for which we four all had a major concern. In retrospect, it still seems appropriate to identify this as a watershed moment; members of Council could easily have chosen to take up defensive positions in a competitive and potentially destructive spirit.

It was into that moment, however, that a short but lastingly important phrase began to be heard, one which seemed to cut through at least some of the tangle, and offered real wisdom at a point of immense vulnerability. The phrase on various speakers' lips was 'a theology of trust': a phrase which seems to offer more by way of unformed promise than of agreed content. When, therefore, we met a few weeks after Council the idea soon emerged that we should run with this phrase and explore what more it might offer to help undergird a precarious moment in our denominational story and to help us secure a realisable future. We felt ourselves uniquely poised for such a venture at that moment precisely because of the trust and confidence we had already built with each other through our months of working together. Over a brief span of years the Colleges had already moved progressively from outright competition, through various stages of cooperation, towards a model which we increasingly described by the term 'complementarity': taking pleasure in the mutual affirmation of each other's work, much of which we were glad to 'own' as work done on behalf of us all. Together we therefore wrote the booklet called *On the Way of Trust* (1997).

We still continue to walk as companions on the road we chose to take at that time and we know that we still have a long way to go before it will be proper to parade too widely our 'success'. We felt that we had enough, however, to offer a model of 'unity in trusting diversity' to other companions on a similar road. There is no point in covering up our real differences, either in the colleges or in the wider Union; but there is every point in entering a strong covenant of trust which can bring added strength to the whole denomination as well as to ourselves. Sections within this second booklet drew on our experience of working with 'story' as a powerful gospel tool, and made us re-think some of the pastoral as well as structural implications of covenant trust. As colleges we wanted to say then, as still we do today, that along with churches and Associations we *are* this Union, and we are proud to share in its life '... on the way of trust.'

It would be foolish to suggest that our efforts were ever more than small contributory waves within the immensely broader tide of our denominational history, but it remains pleasing to think that our studies did indeed form a useful contribution to the story which as yet unfolds. The Consultation Process – as it later came to be known – has been long and drawn out; indeed it still continues. We have remained convinced that one element of continuing

importance is sustained and informed theological reflection on the shifting contexts in which we find ourselves called to discern the mind of Christ.

Calling together a theological consultation, of a different kind from usual, in Oxford in August 1999 was another outworking of this primary conviction. It has been encouraging to receive the affirmation of many colleagues in our wider denomination, ordained and lay, for whom a new forum for trusting theological conversation has been especially welcome. This is where the four who make their appearance together one last time in this our third booklet (which is the sixth study in which three of us have shared) now bow out of the immediate race – but we *are* poised to re-group.

The story goes on

A further Theological Consultation, now being called for August 2001 in Manchester, is at the invitation of four new ‘Principal’ companions: Christopher Ellis, Paul Fiddes, Richard Kidd and Nigel Wright. Our hope is that none of the ground gained in recent years will be lost in these recent changes to the team; and more than ever, our hope is that others are also ready to run with us and alongside us.

The days are gone when solo-players are those best equipped to secure a future for the denominational family to which we are so proud to belong. What we need, and what we in small measure have tried to model and encourage, is a strong collaborative spirit, a spirit which will release amongst us vitality far in excess of anything individually we are likely to produce. In offering this present booklet we commend to all our companions what we call here ‘Doing Theology Together’; may God always be recognizable as our close companion on the road.

The books and booklets discussed

1. Keith W. Clements, Richard L. Kidd, Paul S. Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Brian Haymes, *A Call to Mind. Baptist Essays Towards a Theology of Commitment* (London: The Baptist Union, 1981).
2. Paul S. Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Richard L. Kidd, Keith W. Clements, Brian Haymes, *Bound to Love. The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: The Baptist Union, 1985).
3. Paul S. Fiddes (ed.), *Reflections on the Water. Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers* (Oxford: Regent's Park College/Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1996). Contributors: Christopher Ellis, Paul S. Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd, Hazel Sherman; with Christopher Rowland.
4. Richard Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare. A Study of the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996). Jointly written by: Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd, Michael Quicke.
5. Richard Kidd (ed.), *On the Way of Trust* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1997). Jointly written by: Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd, Michael Quicke.
6. Paul S. Fiddes (ed.), *The Baptist Way of Doing Theology* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2001). Contributors: Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard L. Kidd, Michael Quicke.

Notes

- ¹ L. G. Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', printed in *Baptist Quarterly*, 28 (1980), p. 206.
- ² This has not sold widely among British Baptists, but has been frequently used in ecumenical conversations between Baptists and others, and has been distributed extensively among Baptists in the Baptist World Alliance.

Theology and a Baptist way of community

PAUL S. FIDDES

The shaping of theology by community

In an earlier chapter, Brian Haymes affirmed that, despite all the joking about it, there is indeed a Baptist way of doing theology. We can now strengthen this by drawing attention to a phrase that has some currency among Baptists at present: 'the Baptist way of being the Church'. If there is such a thing as this, then there *must* also be a Baptist way of doing theology. As long as we can identify a Christian community, or family of communities, as something called 'Baptist', then there must be a Baptist mode of theologizing. Of course, this is only one mode among others; there is nothing exclusive about it. But it is there, amid the glorious plurality and diversity of theologies.

The Baptist theologian, James McClendon, has already been quoted in this booklet as defining theology as 'the discovery, understanding and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community',¹ and it is this necessary relation between community and theology that we should now explore. For this project, we may call three witnesses in support.

1. First witness: to the experience of the community

First, from the shadows of the nineteenth century, steps as witness the figure of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who has often been called 'the Father of modern Protestant Theology'. His insight was that since theology was a reflection on *experience of God*, it must belong to a particular community with its own corporate sense of Christ as Redeemer in its midst. There was, he thought, a universal human consciousness or feeling of 'absolute dependence' upon God as the source of life and being, but this sense of God never occurred in a

merely general form. It was always specific to the community in a particular time and place in which the Redeemer was present, to shape and purify this experience. His concern was not, we notice, individual, subjective experience but the shared experience of a group.

Schleiermacher, in his own church setting, thus proposed that there must in Germany be a Protestant Theology and a Catholic Theology, as long as these communities of faith were distinct from each other in their life and worship.² He was, we might say, being realistic about the tragic situation of a broken church universal. As long as the church of Christ is rent asunder into different communities of belief, there will be different styles of theology. Schleiermacher hastens to affirm that we must work to overcome division in the visible form of the church, as something which is 'merely temporary'. Moreover, he urges that the separations that exist at present must not prevent us from seeking as much fellowship as is possible.³

We might take issue with Schleiermacher's focus on 'feeling', though it would be fairer to translate this as 'intuition' since what he had in view was not something as driven by emotion as the English word 'feeling' portrays. He wanted to get away from the split between 'knowing' and 'doing' into which the philosopher Kant had plunged Christian thinking, isolating Christian belief as he had to the area of 'doing' or morality. In face of this, Schleiermacher wanted to affirm 'feeling' as a way of knowing God. We should certainly bring the *practices* of a community, its actions inside or outside its boundaries, more firmly together with experience than Schleiermacher did at times. Yet for all this, Schleiermacher was making the important point that as long as communities have differences in their 'consciousness' of God and each other, there will be differences in the theologies that reflect on that experience.

Schleiermacher's insight is still alive today; it is embodied in German Universities by there being two separate Faculties of Theology – Protestant and Catholic. From the British scene we tend to feel rather critical and even superior about this. *Our* university faculties of theology are (to put it negatively) non-confessional and (to put it positively) ecumenical. Our Baptist colleges in the UK are connected to universities within the public system of higher education, and are committed to doing theology across the boundaries of the churches. In my own situation in Oxford, candidates are formed for Baptist ministry in a university faculty which includes not only a good number

of Baptists, but members of the United Reformed and Methodist churches, Anglicans who are canons of Christ Church Cathedral or teachers in Anglican theological colleges, Roman Catholic theologians who are members of four orders (Benedictine, Jesuit, Dominican and Franciscan), and a Greek Orthodox Bishop who is an internationally-known Patristics scholar. All happily teach alongside each other. When theological colleagues come to visit us from elsewhere in Europe – especially Germany – or from seminaries in North America, they greatly appreciate the novel experience of working together in seminars across the denominations. For my own part, I must say that this ecumenical context has been a major influence in shaping my writing of Christian doctrine, while at the same time it has sharpened my awareness of the distinctive features of Baptist life and witness, and has made me more and not less of a Baptist.

Despite, however, all these advantages of a non-confessional stance of theology in the universities, we in Britain have also paid a price for it. Theology in some university faculties has become detached from the life and mission of the church. It has become a field of study using the same methods of investigation and research as other humanities, and has often obtained respectability by becoming simply identified with Religious Studies – an important discipline but a separate one from theology. Unlike German courses in theology, Christian Ethics has become an optional module rather than being an inseparable part of the study of systematic theology. Courses that combine theology and pastoral studies, or offer a considerable amount of reflection on the practice of the Christian community, have increasingly migrated from University faculties into courses at theological colleges which are *accredited* by the Universities, and this has tended to increase a sense of separation within the Universal Christian Church. In Universities where courses in pastoral study and degrees in ‘practical theology’ *are* embedded in the interior life of University faculties (and I am glad to name Oxford as one of these!), those who teach them may nevertheless be mainly those who are employed by churches or by church colleges, rather than those who hold posts on the establishment of the University itself.

In a variety of ways, then, a ‘non-confessional’ approach to theology at university level may result in the sundering of academic theology from the experience and the practice of actual church communities. A better way forward is surely a ‘multi-confessional’ one, enabling students to reflect on a

plurality of ways of life in community, across the separated Christian families. In such an approach the distinctive life-style of Baptist communities, marked by a particular Baptist experience, will have a part to play.

What then is this 'Baptist experience' which shapes theology? In the first place, the presence of the Kingdom of God which can be known in all the world is experienced in the church as the rule of Christ in the congregation. The liberty of local churches to make decisions about their own life and ministry is not based in a human view of autonomy or independence, or in selfish individualism, but in a sense of being under the direct rule of Christ who relativizes other rules. This liberating rule of Christ is the foundation of what makes for the distinctive 'feel' of Baptist congregational life, which allows for spiritual oversight (*episkope*) both by the *whole* congregation gathered together in church meeting, and by the minister(s) called to lead the congregation.⁴ This oscillating movement between corporate and individual oversight is difficult to pin down, and can lead to disasters when it begins to swing wildly from one side to another, but it is based in taking the rule of Christ seriously. Since the same rule of Christ can be experienced in assemblies of churches together,⁵ there is also the basis here for Baptist associational life, and indeed for participating in ecumenical clusters. Flexible though it is in its actualization, and taking different forms as it does among different cultures, there is something about this response to the rule of Christ which Baptists recognize as familiar wherever they meet it in the world.

Another familiar experience arises from the practice of believers' baptism, in which the candidate is expected to be able to affirm that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' for him or herself. This is not to say that baptism is a witness to faith *rather than* a moment of objective encounter with the transforming grace of God, nor that it is an individual act *rather than* a corporate act of the church in its own faithfulness. The sacrament is all these things at once, and this is the intensity of its meaning and effectiveness. My concern here is simply with aspects of the 'Baptist experience', and part of this is being part of a community in which it is expected that any member will be able and willing – if asked – to witness to her or his own sense of being called by Christ into a life of discipleship, both individual and shared with others. Such a baptismal word of witness is also a prophetic word, challenging the powers and structures of society around with the call of Christ to a life marked by compassion and justice. This does not require a high degree of intellectual understanding

and assent, nor a standard form of words (the more surprising the better!); moreover, in the case of those who are severely handicapped in mind or body, others in the community may need to employ a spiritual imagination and insight to discern a witness, perhaps offered in non-verbal ways.

Linked with this experience is a third, that all members are gifted in leading others in worship of the triune God, and that no equipment or resources are needed (neither prayer book nor overhead projector) except the presence of two or three Christian disciples gathered together. This does not neglect the discipline of training in the leading of worship; it does not undermine the special calling of the pastor by Christ to lead worship representatively and regularly; it does not deny that any congregation which fails to draw upon the liturgical riches of the Church Universal will soon become impoverished. All these elements are part of the Baptist experience. But at the centre is a freedom to worship unconstrained by forms which are sanctioned either by tradition or human law. Liturgies are the more meaningful when they are used because there is no requirement to use them. Led by others in worship like this, the Baptist Christian will also expect to hear the word of God mediated through fellow members as they read and interpret the scriptures in their own context of daily life and work.

I have tried here to identify some aspects of the experience of being part of a Baptist community of worship and mission, rather than making a list of Baptist principles. It is the experience of walking together under a rule which liberates from human rule, the experience of being with others who can witness to being called to follow Christ's way of life, and the experience of being led by each other into the interweaving life of the triune God. This is the experience of a group of people who – in Britain – have been for the most part from the working classes, until this century largely self-educated, for much of their history oppressed or excluded from positions in society, and who have been throughout their history advocates for liberty of religion and conscience for all. In some parts of the world today this is still their social profile. I do not mean to claim that this is an experience exclusive to Baptists, but that wherever it happens theology will be shaped by it; it does happen among Baptists, and so there is a Baptist way of doing theology. Theological concepts such as the rule of God and authority will have to take reflection on this experience into account.

2. Second witness: to the confession of a community

In case readers are becoming uncomfortable with this appeal to experience, I call the witness of Karl Barth. Theology for Barth is, in the first place, the *confession* of the church in response to God's self-revelation. God speaks a word to us and enables us to speak it back to God. 'Theology' is talk *about* God and talk *to* God at the same time; it is, in human terms, impossible – but God requires us to do the impossible with the help of grace. With God all things are possible, even the overcoming of the infinite gap of speech between Creator and created. First-order theology is thus not the theological works written by an Augustine, Luther, Schleiermacher or even a Karl Barth, but the confession of the church in its worship, its creeds, its preaching, its works of love and its testimony through individual believers. For Barth, what we usually call 'theology' is a second-order activity of examining the witness of the church; it is the critical discipline of assessing the content of the church's talk about God, and so can be called 'Church Dogmatics'.⁶

If this is so, then we need to listen to the way that a community talks about God. Theology will be shaped not only by the experience of the community but by its confession. Barth regards the great, historic statements of faith as a kind of Christian proclamation or preaching, and the task of theology is to reflect upon them, to test them against the disclosure of the Word of God and to use them in turn to help us understand the Word.⁷ Barth himself makes little distinction between creeds and confessions in this venture, though the difference is quite important in the Baptist way of doing theology. While the 'creeds' have been generally seen as binding belief and conscience, Baptists have not been reluctant to compile 'confessions' for use in teaching, for making clear the basis on which they covenant together, and for explaining their belief and practice to those outside Baptist communities.

The distinction then is not an absolute one, and is rather more about the way that statements of faith are used. In many Baptist confessions, the major creeds of the world-wide church have in fact been explicitly acknowledged as trustworthy witnesses to faith. A General Baptist confession of 1678, for instance, affirms that the Creed of Nicaea and the so-called Athanasian Creed were to be 'received' and 'believed' and 'taught by the ministers of Christ'.⁸ At the very first Congress of the Baptist World Alliance, in London in 1905, the chairman Dr Alexander McLaren called on the vast gathering to repeat

together the words of the Apostles' Creed as 'a simple acknowledgement of where we stand and what we believe.' In the later twentieth century the German-language Baptist confession used in Germany, Austria and Switzerland declares that 'it presupposes the Apostles' Creed as a common confession of Christendom',⁹ and the Norwegian Baptists have affirmed 'the content' of both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed.¹⁰ The model covenant service, recently produced by the Baptist Union of Great Britain for use in churches in 2001, provides in its main text the alternatives of a selection of scripture verses and the Apostles' Creed as a means of confessing the Christian faith, and includes the Nicene Creed in further resources.

In early Baptist life, a confession was often associated with the 'covenant' by which the community renewed its pledge of faithfulness to its Lord, and committed itself to a common life and mutual caring (and more is said about covenants later in this essay). The Church Book, for instance, might contain both a confession and a form of covenant, adjacent to each other. Appeal has recently been made to this relationship between confession and covenant to propose the adoption of a modern statement of faith by Baptists where one does not exist (for example in Britain). Some have urged that if we are to develop the notion of covenant as a basis for the associating or the union of churches together, then a confession of faith is needed as a basis for the covenant. But in the early years of Baptist churches in England, there was an ambiguity about the link between the confession of faith adopted by a church and its covenant document.¹¹ While the two might be adjacent, the one was not *included* in the other. Covenant is about relationship and trust, about 'walking together' which is in some mysterious way part of the very journey of salvation. Such an open journey cannot be finally fixed in a document. If we are to learn from, and yet not be bound by, our past, I suggest that a theological and practical distance should be kept between confessions and covenants; confessions should be regarded as the *context* for covenant-making, but never be the *required* basis for 'walking together'. As the present group of authors argued in their study of a modern covenant document, the *Declaration of Principle*, 'in the making of covenant, be it at Sinai, Calvary or in the present day, the text is always subordinate to the relationship'.¹²

Nevertheless, in doing theology in a Baptist way we will pay attention to the confessions which have been produced by different Baptist communities in different contexts. They will not be tests of membership, but they are im-

portant examples of proclamation. Baptist theologians should be familiar with the Baptist early confessions, and the way that they affirm Reformation insights into grace, faith, ministry and covenant in the setting of seventeenth century England. They should be aware of a range of modern Baptist confessions, and reflect on those that have arisen in Europe in the context of a prevailing Catholic, Orthodox or Lutheran environment (confessions from Italy, Romania and Germany are good examples here¹³). Finally, it is worth reflecting theologically on the statements produced by the world communion of Baptists in assembly together – such as the declarations about evangelism (Seoul 1990, Madras 1995), racism (Harare 1992, Atlanta 1999) and worship (Berlin 1998).¹⁴ These are examples of proclaiming the faith in the world today, and they are resources for theology as ‘Church Dogmatics’.

3. A third witness: to the stories of a community

Third, in case readers are becoming uncomfortable about an appeal to German-speaking theologians alone (one Lutheran and one Reformed), we should call the witness of the Baptist theologian, James McClendon, to whom I have already referred. He begins his *Systematic Theology* with the affirmation that this is to be in a ‘Baptist mode’ of doing theology. Among other reasons, this is because the narrative of scripture must always shape the narrative of a particular community: story will transform story.¹⁵

It is, of course, fairly current theological coin at the moment to speak about the scriptural narrative as the ‘grammar’ of a Christian community, providing the structure for its speaking and acting. But McClendon understands the Baptist vision to be nothing other than a shared awareness that the present Christian community *is* the early Christian community and *is* the eschatological community. Baptists understand themselves, he suggests, as living *immediately* in the scriptural story and in the story of the day of judgement, and it is this that shapes their convictions and their ethics. We may differ about whether or not this is the *central* organizing principle for a baptist theology. But if theology is *at all* about the interaction of the story of scripture with the story of a community, then this story is a particular one, held by a particular people. There is what McClendon calls a ‘community of reference’ for theology; Baptists have a shared story, so they must have a theology.

McClendon suggests that Baptist theology should thus draw upon a rich

variety of material from the narrative life of the community – hymns, journals, stories, as well as confessions. In his American context he points to the recovery of the story of blackness among Baptists, such as the way that slaves deliberately lived in the story of the Exodus.¹⁶ In both Britain and North America we have significant stories about the struggle for liberty on which we can reflect. Thomas Helwys died in prison in 1616 (the date is not exact) because of his plea for religious liberty for all, whether Christians, Jews, Moslems or ‘heretics’. Roger Williams was exiled into the New England wilderness, the ‘Siberia’ of the time, for refusing to accept the restrictions laid on people by the idea of a ‘Christian nation’. John Bunyan wrote his dream of the pilgrim from a Bedford jail because he would not conform to the limits imposed on preaching the gospel of Christ. William Knibb led the fight against slavery in the British colony of Jamaica, and was vilified by the landowners as ‘Knibb the Notorious’. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed his dream of a non-segregated American South and paid for the dream with his life. These stories of dissent shape the community, as Richard Kidd shows in the next chapter, and they need to influence theology too.

In England we surely also need to recover the hidden stories of *women* in our churches. To take just one example, there was the circle of literary women to which the Baptist poet and hymn-writer Anne Steele belonged in the mid-eighteenth century. Her niece, under the pen-name Silvia, wrote much poetry on the subject of friendship, and it is this theme that forms the basis for her passionate advocacy of liberty, especially for the American colonists. The renewed interest in the place of friendship in gender-relations in our time makes the thought and experience of these women of special interest in Baptist theologizing. Perhaps we have moved on just a little from one reviewer of Silvia’s verse, who commented that ‘There is an excellence in this poem which few writers attain, and which from a female pen especially is not always expected.’¹⁷

Our three witnesses – Schleiermacher, Barth, McClendon – tell us that the experience, the confession and the stories of a community shape theology. In this sense, as long as there is a Baptist community, there will be a Baptist theology. But this leads to a problem that has already been hinted at several times in this booklet: how do we identify a Baptist community? *Which* communities are these which give rise to a Baptist way of doing theology?

Identifying a Baptist community

The opening chapter named a number of convictions that belong to a Baptist community – the gathered church, the priesthood of all believers, the absolute authority of God in Christ, believers' baptism, the call to faithful corporate discipleship, and religious freedom. These convictions in themselves, as Brian Haymes says, are not unique to Baptists, but the way that Baptists have held them is still important. We might say further, I think, that there is something distinctively Baptist about the way we have *held these convictions together*; the combination or constellation is more distinctive than the single items. There is especially something distinctive about the way that the convictions have been held together within a particular worship-life and practice of church meetings.

But having said this, there might well be communities holding these convictions, or versions of them, which we find it hard to identify with – or which would find it a strain to identify with *us*. To remind us of what the problem is, I divert for the moment into recalling an instalment of the American TV sit-com, *Ally McBeal*, set in a lawyer's office. This particular episode featured the male editor of a feminist magazine who had been fired by the woman owner because he was a Southern Baptist, and the Southern Baptist Convention had recently declared as a point of principle that a wife should 'submit to the servant leadership of her husband'. The editor himself disagreed strongly with this declaration, and stated his own convictions in court. He won his case against unfair dismissal, because it turned out that the woman editor was not interested in his personal view; it was enough for her that he was a Baptist, and that the Baptist Convention had made this statement – and has since, indeed, embodied it in its confession of faith.¹⁸

This little story raises some interesting questions of Baptist identity. Within the story itself, was the owner right to identify the editor with other Baptists who held certain views about women? In what sense could the editor identify *himself* with those whom he disagreed with on a fundamental issue? But outside the story, what about the viewers? Several million people in the UK who saw the episode will now assume that Baptists in general hold this view about the status of women; they have no idea about the difference between British Baptists and Southern Baptists. And do *we* regard ourselves as fellow Bap-

tists with Southern Baptists, and if so, which ones? Just the editors of feminist magazines? One notable Baptist defender of civil liberties writes, 'In Washington when I tell someone "Yes, I'm a Baptist and I work for Baptists," their response often drips with snide. I hurriedly say, "But I'm a Bill Moyers, Jimmy Carter, Barbara Jordan kind of Baptist"'.¹⁹ We probably have our own lists of those whom we want to approve as fellow-Baptists; but do they make a community in the sense we have explored it above? How, then, do we identify a Baptist community? There are perhaps two ways of approaching this question.

1. 'baptist', not 'Baptist'

The first approach is that adopted by James McClendon, who writes 'Baptist' with a small 'b'. By 'baptist' he means a certain approach to faith and life which he roots in the Radical Reformation, and which is actualized, however imperfectly, in a wide range of communities.²⁰ Some of these might not call themselves Baptist, and others which *do* call themselves Baptist he would not recognize as embodying baptist principles (with a small 'b'). So we take a universal characteristic and see where it might be localized. Those who deny being 'Baptist with a big B' usually do so for the commendable reason of wanting to recover and preserve principles that have marked Baptist tradition, especially its beginnings in a Reformation form of dissent, but which seem lamentably absent today. This approach also does relieve people from the real discomfort of relating to actual Baptist churches whose views and practices are alien to them. Thus, they still regard themselves as 'baptist' without being an active member of any Baptist congregation.

We must recognize that for some this may be the only way of coping with a situation in which they may not otherwise continue in church membership and even in faith. The problem with this approach, however, is that we might end up with a highly personalized view of what it is to be baptist. Or we might be seeking for the same kind of homogeneous fellowship which has been rightly criticized in certain theories of church growth, refusing the disturbing challenge of living with those who are 'not like us'. (I certainly do not mean to imply here that James McClendon himself could have been counted among those who take the 'baptistic' principle to this extreme.)

2. *Identity as identification*

A second way of approaching the question of identity is not to begin from baptistic universals, but from a more local form of Baptist life with which we can easily identify, even if we criticize it in some respects. This local form might be a national Union, or it might even be a section within a Union. I suggest, for example, that the four aspects of a Baptist way of doing theology that were singled out in the first chapter can be identified more with the local story of Baptist life and nonconformity in England than in many (perhaps most) other parts of the world. But from this localized, owned identity we are then called by Christ into *as wide a fellowship as is possible*. This is the way of trust, not a demand for absolute sameness.²¹

In a broken situation of the Church universal we can only have a world-wide fellowship through world communions, or what are often despised as ‘denominations’. These are imperfect signs of a universal church, and Baptists have kept the future open with an eschatological symbol – that is, declining to call the wider ecclesial structures ‘*the Baptist Church*’. But we will never have meaningful, committed and costly relations with those in other cultures and societies without international communions. Of course, we can pick and choose individuals whom we want to support with our money and prayers, but this will inevitably be satisfying to our own concerns and limited to our own knowledge of the world. Commitment to a world *communion* of churches will bring the surprises and challenges of links with places which were not originally in our horizon of interests, and with people who are different from us and who are to be valued for who they are. We will make covenant with others for fellowship and mission, and out of faithful obedience to Christ who is the Lord of the church, we will identify with those whom we cannot agree with about everything (or sometimes it seems, not much at all), but in whom we catch even an echo of the Baptist story that is ours.

I have myself caught these echoes among Baptists throughout the world. I have stood with fellow Baptists at a service in Sam Sharpe Square in Montego Bay, Jamaica, a place named in memory of the Baptist deacon and slave who was executed for his protest against the British slave system. I have prayed with fellow Baptists by the side of the Han river in Seoul, Korea, and witnessed several thousand young people being baptized – not in a media spec-

tacle, but each one greeted personally by his or her pastor. I have lectured with fellow Baptists in the University of Timisoare, Romania, near the square where more than fifty young people were killed in the revolution of 1989 as they demonstrated for freedom, shouting 'God exists'. I have talked with Portuguese Baptists in Lisbon, where the great earthquake of 1755 is still remembered as the event which shook people's faith in a good creator, and destroyed a whole system of natural theology. I have shared in a Sunday morning service in the black township of Tembisa near Johannesburg where the previous night Zulu Inkata terrorists had massacred nearly a hundred people, and I have experienced Zulu and Chosa Baptists worshipping together in acceptance of each other. I have sat with Baptists in Cuba, listening to the way that they understand mission in their neighbourhood, led by a pastor who serves as a Deputy in Fidel Castro's government, and suffers rejection by fellow Christians because of this involvement in politics. Through these experiences, my thinking has been shaped in a way that would not have been possible without a shared identity as Baptists.

Identity, I suggest, is more about *identification* than about being *identical*. This mood is caught by an American Baptist historian, who ends his answer to the question 'why are you a Baptist?' with the words: 'Religion at its best is not generic; it has specificity and peculiarity. Being a Baptist is messy, controversial, divisive, and energizing.'²² It is not that we share an already-existing identity through establishing a common list of items, but we willingly *identify* ourselves with others who want to make covenant with us because they catch an echo of their story in us. This desire and our response will take us, often, into depths of shared life beyond what is possible at present in ecumenical sharing, and will give us an identity which will bring a richness to the ecumenical fellowship. In short, identity is about covenant-faithfulness, and this appeal to covenant brings me to a third major point of my proposal. Is there something we can say about the Baptist way of doing theology that takes us firmly into content as well as method?

Baptist interests in theology

In exploring what the Baptist way of doing theology might be, Brian Haymes has already identified four characteristics of *method* in theology, rooted in distinctive Baptist convictions about the nature of the church: our approach

to theologizing is marked by a continual re-making, a collegiality, a living in the biblical story, and a generous pluralism. I agree wholeheartedly with all of this. Now, what we have seen above about the experience, the confession and the stories of a community leads me to go further and suggest that there is a Baptist shape to the *content* of the theology too.

I do not mean that there is a Baptist Christology, eschatology or doctrine of God. But our being in our particular community will give us a kind of guiding interest, a theme which remains as a kind of *cantus firmus*, an underlying rhythm beneath the counterpoint of detail, even when it does not become overt. Other Christian communions have such a theme which has generally appeared within the work of major theologians in their story. I will take the risk of crude generalization, and suggest that the Reformed tradition is interested in the theme of the sovereignty of God, exemplified by Calvin; Lutherans cannot write much without returning to the theme of justification by faith, exemplified by Luther; Catholic theology still organizes a great deal of its thought around the transformation of nature by grace, as expounded by the Scholastics; the Orthodox church continually explores the theme of *theosis* or the divinization of human life, as found in the Eastern Church Fathers but given firm outlines by St Maximus the Confessor.

As Baptists we do not have such formative theologians. But we do have a theological theme that was of central importance for several centuries, and is gradually being recovered in our day. I mean the idea of *covenant*, which we share with English Congregationalists – now part of the United Reformed Church – but which took particular form in our own church life. This stands at the beginning of our story, as we recall an event at Gainsborough near Lincoln in 1606 or 1607, when a congregation of English separatists made a covenant together. As William Bradford recalled the event years later in America, the members:

joined them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospell, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.²³

They were not yet a Baptist church, but within a year the part of the congre-

gation that gathered in Gainsborough would be in exile in Amsterdam with their pastor, John Smyth, and within two years would have adopted the practice of believers' baptism. Some members of that church would return to England in 1611 with Thomas Helwys as their pastor to found the first General Baptist church on English soil.

Much has been written about the place of the covenant in Baptist history, not least by my predecessor at Regent's Park College, B.R. White.²⁴ What I want to emphasize is that the making of a covenant by a local congregation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not simply regarded by them as a *human* act of commitment to each other, a making of a kind of voluntary society. In covenanting together, they believed there to be an intersection between the promise-making of members of a local congregation, and God's eternal covenant of grace. In some mysterious way this eternal covenant, made from God's side and by God's own initiative, became actual in time and space when believers bound themselves to each other in faithful fellowship. In the full scope of covenant theology, the eternal covenant has three aspects: first it is God's making peace with sinful humanity, through the sacrifice of Christ; second, it is God's agreement to take the church as God's own people; and third (underlying the first two), it is the agreed purpose within the very triune life of God, the intention established between Father, Son and Spirit, to create and redeem humanity. These three dimensions of the eternal covenant were all somehow implicated in the relationships of believers as they made covenant with each other and with God.²⁵

While there was no Baptist theologian who is regarded as *the* theologian of covenant thought, Benjamin Keach perhaps comes nearest. As well as the theology he wrote (mainly his sermons!) on 'The Covenant of Peace Opened'²⁶ he wrote a covenant document for his own church which was published in 1697 and remained a model for other churches to copy for over a century. This is how it begins:

We do solemnly, in the presence of God, and of each other, in the sense of our own unworthiness, give up ourselves to the Lord, in a Church State according to the Apostolical Constitution that he may be our God, and we may be his People, through the Everlasting Covenant of his free grace, in which alone we hope to be accepted by him, through his blessed Son Jesus Christ, whom we take to be our High Priest..... our Prophet.... And the King of Saints.²⁷

There is a theological depth to this church covenant that we seldom achieve in the modern form of church constitution. What does it mean to give themselves in covenant 'through the Everlasting Covenant'? In that 'through' there lies vast room for exploration. There has been a good deal of recent reflection among British Baptists on the implications of covenant for our *ecclesiology*, for our associating together not only locally, but at regional and national levels. But here for a moment I want to consider how this theme might guide the doing of theology in general. Briefly, I offer three suggestions.

First, it should mean that Baptist theologians will be interested in the theological idea of 'participation' in God.²⁸ If the covenant fellowship of local Christians somehow shares in the covenant fellowship of God's own life, then the whole of theology should reflect this being 'in God.' The link between human community and divine communion is in fact a guiding thought in the attempt of Stanley Grenz to write a Systematic Theology from a Baptist perspective, called *Theology for the Community of God*. This is a massive and formative work to which Baptists should be much indebted, although I would want to go one stage further myself in relating communion and covenant. Grenz proposes that the Baptist notion of the church as a covenanting people 'focuses our attention on its actual manifestation in human history'; so *covenant* roots us in time and space, while the idea of the church as *community* or communion 'lifts our conception beyond the activity of God in history to the life of the triune God himself, which provides the foundation for that activity.'²⁹ I suggest that covenant and communion in God are in fact mysteriously intertwined in *both* time and eternity, and that in this interaction there is a distinctive Baptist theme. It has some affinity, though in its own Baptist way, to the Orthodox theology of *theosis*, or 'divinization', which does not mean 'becoming God' but sharing to the most intimate degree in the fellowship of the divine life.

Second, the theme of covenant means that Baptist theologians will always be working and struggling with the relation between divine grace and human freewill. Covenant brings together human responsibility in keeping covenant, and divine initiative in making covenant in the first place. No one can enter into a church covenant without being presented with both these truths: as Keach puts it, '*we give up ourselves, through the everlasting covenant.*' In our own story, Baptists have brought these truths together for the sake of mission. Andrew Fuller did this on the verge of the nineteenth century with

his book called *A Gospel worthy of All Acceptation*, combining a confidence in God's sovereign purpose in atonement with the human moral duty to respond to it.³⁰ This provided a theological foundation for the work of the newly founded Baptist Missionary Society. At the beginning of the twentieth century, faced by the need for a united mission in England, General and Particular Baptists came together into a Union, so uniting the truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in their own bodies.³¹ At the beginning of the twenty-first century there are new ways that we need to work at bringing these truths together: for instance, in the face of the scientific challenge we need to think about what free-will means in the form of the self-creativity of living things and processes. How do creaturely human response and divine grace come together in the interacting web of organic life? And how can both divine grace and human freedom come together in another interacting web, the network of electronic communications?

Third, the theme of covenant should interest us in the place of promises within human life in general. This can be viewed from several angles. The political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, writes that societies can only get over their evil from the past, and change for the better, through two faculties: forgiveness, and the power to make and keep promises. Promises, she suggests, deal with 'the ocean of uncertainty' in the future by setting up 'islands of security' which make it possible for relationships to continue and endure.³² Government requires agreement between human persons and a reliance on promise, but it seems we are living in a society at present in which people find commitment difficult, and distrust the promises made by elected leaders. While covenant is a deeper theological concept than a voluntary social contract there are connections between these ideas, and Baptist theology may have particular resources for exploring the theme of promise in society and fostering a renewal of mutual trust. Further, societies are shaped (even perhaps created) by language, and promising has become a significant theme in the philosophy of language, as an important example of performative speech. In this way of thinking, words do not just refer to things, but 'get things done'; they are not only signs, but promote actions. Biblically, the idea of promise is at the heart of covenant between God and human partners: a God who promises gives us security while leaving the future open for surprising fulfilments of the promise. A God who promises 'gets things done', but in such a way that in the coming of fulfilment there is plenty of room for human

contribution to God's project.

These are just hints of ways that the concept of covenant among Baptists can make a considerable contribution to social, political, philosophical and biblical studies. More than this, a theology that interacts with these disciplines will be shaped by a Baptist *community* that is aware of itself as standing in covenant relationship. In the light of this, I want to end with a question, posed to myself as much as to others. We have no difficulty with the expressions 'Catholic theology', 'Lutheran theology' and even 'Anglican theology'. Why is it that we find 'Baptist theology' or even 'a Baptist way of doing theology' odd? Are we sensitive about being thought sectarian, or might it be that we are just unsure of our identity as Baptists? As pastors, we do not shrink from the title 'Baptist minister'; when we become theologians, why do we prefer to be anonymous?

Notes

- ¹ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 23.
- ² F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, transl. H. R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968), pp. 88-93; Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*, transl. Terence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 94-7, 113-15.
- ³ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 682-7.
- ⁴ See The London Confession Baptist Confession, 1644, repr. in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959); article XLIV (p. 168).
- ⁵ See The London Confession Baptist Confession, 1644, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*; introduction (p. 155) and article XLVII (pp. 168-9).
- ⁶ For the above, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, transl. and ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-77), I/1, pp. 71-87.
- ⁷ See for example, Barth's use of the Nicene Creed in developing a doctrine of the 'Eternal Son': *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 423-7.
- ⁸ *The Orthodox Creed*, art. 38, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 326-7.
- ⁹ G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe. History & Confessions of Faith* (Nashville:

- Broadman Press, 1982), p. 57. So also the Confession of the Baptist Union of Finland, *ibid.*, p. 111.
- ¹⁰ Parker, *Baptists in Europe*, p. 111.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 414; cf. Roger Hayden, 'Baptists, Covenants and Confessions' in P. S. Fiddes et al. (London: Baptist Union, 1985), *Bound to Love*, pp. 26-8.
- ¹² Hayden, 'Baptists, Covenants and Confessions', p. 25.
- ¹³ For the modern confessions of German and Romanian Baptists, see Parker, *Baptists in Europe*, pp. 57-76. The Confession of Faith of the Christian Evangelical Baptist Union of Italy is published by *Il Seminatore*, Piazza S. Lorenzo in Lucina, 35, Roma.
- ¹⁴ See Tony Cupit (ed.), *Baptist World Alliance Covenants and Declarations 1990-2000* (McLean, VA: Baptist World Alliance, 2000).
- ¹⁵ McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 31-5.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ¹⁷ Reviewed in the *Monthly Review*, 1779. See Marjorie Reeves, 'Literary Women in Eighteenth-Century Nonconformist Circles', in Jane Shaw & Alan Kreider (eds), *Culture and the Nonconformist Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 20.
- ¹⁸ Revised Version of *The Baptist Faith and Message* of the Southern Baptist Convention, USA, adopted 14 June 2000: see article XVIII The Family.
- ¹⁹ James M. Dunn, 'Yes, I am a Baptist' in Cecil P. Staton (ed.), *Why I am a Baptist. Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1999), p. 48.
- ²⁰ McClendon, *Ethics*, 19-21, 34-5.
- ²¹ See Richard L. Kidd (ed.), *The Way of Trust* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1997), pp. 21-7.
- ²² Bill Leonard, 'Being Baptist. Hospitable Traditionalism', in Staton (ed.), *Why I am a Baptist*, p. 88.
- ²³ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation* Vol. 1, 1620-1647 (repr. Boston: Mass. Historical Society, 1912), pp. 20, 22.
- ²⁴ B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); an important extension of argument was written by White's former doctoral student, Stephen Brachlow, in *The Communion of Saints. Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology 1570-1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Between them, these books offer the classical foundation for any study of Baptist ecclesiology.

- ²⁵ See Paul S. Fiddes, ‘“Walking Together”: the Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday’, in W. H. Brackney & P.S. Fiddes (eds), *Pilgrim Pathways. Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 52-5.
- ²⁶ Benjamin Keach, *The Display of Glorious Grace. Or, The Covenant of Peace Opened* (London, 1698).
- ²⁷ Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and Its Discipline Display’d* (London, 1697), p. 71.
- ²⁸ Stanley L. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 628. Grenz thus concentrates on the idea of making a covenant community through voluntary commitment: Grenz, pp. 603-10, 630; for a complementary view, stressing the initiative of divine grace, see Fiddes, ‘“Walking Together”’, pp. 68-72.
- ²⁹ At the Oxford Consultation, Graham Watts made a similar plea in his paper, ‘The Spirit and Community. Trinitarian Pneumatology and the Church’, *Theology in Context* 1 (2000), pp. 71-3. I have myself attempted such a theology in Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).
- ³⁰ Andrew Fuller, *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, 2nd edition (1801) in *Works of Andrew Fuller* (5 Volumes, London, 1837), Vol 2; see, for example, pp. 55ff, 82.
- ³¹ See Richard L. Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare. A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996), pp. 17-24. For a more detailed account, see Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union. A Short History* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1959), pp. 113-43.
- ³² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition. A Study of the Central Conditions Facing Modern Man* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 212-13.

Baptists and theologies of liberation

RICHARD L. KIDD

There is something oddly misguided, embarrassing even, to be caught writing about theologies of liberation; if, that is, they are genuinely concerned with doing before thinking, *praxis* before *doxa*. I am not even convinced about my own credentials to 'do' liberation theology anyway. How can I, as someone deeply immersed in the prosperity of a first world culture, presume to 'do' this thing at all? If it really is about God's bias to the poor, then I as rich ought to be listening to the poor as they offer me *their* wisdom. I should be listening to others who are genuinely marginalized, oppressed and powerless in ways I have never been. There is, alas, no clear way round this uncomfortable contradiction; so, determined not to be found doing nothing, the best I can do is recognize that when I work at theologies of liberation, I am often very much at the 'ology' end of things, the 'critical reflection on ...' rather than the immediate *praxis*.

The Importance of Stories

Often the raw material for my own reflection has taken the form of stories, usually the stories of those who live at the edge, on the underside of history. I cannot copy their experience, but there is vast scope for learning from it. Baptists, it seems to me, should feel very much at home with this. Historically, we have always valued testimony, the stories people tell as they reflect on their experiences of God. The danger is that we only manage to 'hear' the stories which conform to our present assumptions about God and our understanding of God's activity in the world. For many of us it has been an enor-

mous challenge to try and listen carefully enough to allow the testimonies of others, especially of those who do not carry the traditional credentials expected of first world theologians, to break through our prejudiced assumptions and to reshape our understandings and expectations of God.

Let me rehearse some of the stories which have left their imprint on my own life. First I shall tell them, simply as they impacted on me; then I shall try to gather the themes I hear within them, themes which I believe have potential to re-order an agenda for authentic Baptist discipleship.

It was July 1993 when I first listened to a Baptist give serious testimony to the time when he 'crossed the boundary' – from the security of what we might call traditional theology into the relatively uncharted territory I am calling liberating. The place was Mamelodi, a township east of Pretoria in South Africa, and the speaker was a Baptist Pastor, Fanyana Peter Mhlophe, Zulu by birth. Years later as I re-tell the story, I can still taste the exquisite flavour of the chicken we shared in the bare, but immaculately clean, little room next to the Baptist Church where he and his family had been working for many years. I was on very new territory. This was pre-elections South Africa; I had already been fed with hyped white propaganda about how immensely dangerous black townships are, and I was distinctly nervous. Fanyana told how he had first 'crossed the boundary' as he stood to speak at a mass funeral following a fresh round of killings in the township, the day he came face to face with the intolerable poverty of his own theological inheritance. If the preached gospel was to sound a genuine note of hope, it needed to speak directly into the dreadful reality of the political 'now'. At times like that, a word which merely enthuses about out-of-this-world, essentially spiritual, futures seriously lacks credibility. This is not my own imposed interpretation; this is how a Baptist Pastor, schooled in a traditional South African seminary, told it to me, and I found myself bowled over by the authenticity of what he said.

In many ways Mamelodi Baptist Church is not so very different from many Baptist churches I have known in various parts of Britain; but there are some very special people there with extraordinary experiences, and many of them are indebted to the way Fanyana began to work following his liberating conversion, his experience of 'crossing the boundary'.

One of them is Maria, and I recall the evening Fanyana took me to dine with her in Mandela Village, a squatter camp beyond the boundary of the brick-built dwellings of the township. The shanty shack was no larger than

the garage I use for my car back home, divided by a curtain to separate sleeping from living; and you knew it was made of packing cases because you could read the labels on the inside walls as you ate. And I confess that I fell for it; I pre-judged this middle-aged, hard-worn, seemingly typical black woman. I did not pay her the honour she deserves along with all other human beings. I failed to give her what I have since learned to call the 'effort of attention', the real attention that cuts through our prejudiced seeing. On that first visit I hardly glimpsed the calibre of the human being I was meeting: her faith, her hard-won education, her incredible determination and personal resilience.

Maria had not always lived in the squatter camp. She had been a respected member of the township community; but given the institutionalized priority of men over women, when her partner died, she lost her house and her security, and her family was reduced to helping her build a shack beyond the boundary, as it were, not just of the township but of the entire included community.

But Maria took with her her education, her initiative and her committed faith, which she did not relinquish with the loss of her home. I now know, rather later than I ought, the story of the day she determined before God that her energies and intelligence would be used to transform the here-and-now experience of other women still in the township, helping to liberate them from the trap of childcare, which disables them from contributing through paid employment to the family purse. Maria tells of the day she picked up her largest cooking pot, her spoon and walked down the road to the church announcing that she was going to start a crèche. That was a good while ago now. By 1993 there was already a substantial and well-established crèche, with several employed workers and an impressive programme of education for staff and children, and I saw the foundations for a new building (by then needing to accommodate 80-100 children each day). The foundations stood exposed for a long time with no money to progress, but in 1996 I saw walls and in 1998 there were windows and doors as well. Maria is utterly committed to God, and has collaborated with God and with her local Baptist community in a significant work of liberation. And she served, in her shanty, a fine meat supper too! I shall return to her story later.

An ocean and a whole continent away, it was in 1996 that I stayed with David and Rachel Quinney Mee in El Salvador, Central America, in the early days of a growing partnership which Northern Baptist College has enjoyed

with the small Baptist seminary, SEBLA (Seminario Bautista Latinoamericano), in Santa Ana. Late one evening news came that a young man had died in an outlying village, the son of a Baptist pastor with whom David and Rachel had lived for a while in the early years of their work with the Baptist Missionary Society. So it was that I came to attend a funeral. We left early next morning, and what follows is an extract from my journal, written at the end of that remarkable day.

‘Saturday begins for me at 8.00 am, heading for Sesuntepeque, one hour on the road to San Miguel and a second hour north into the hills. When we arrive in the home of Rafael the small room, which is both the family living room and the Baptist chapel, is crowded with people seated facing a simple display: candles, crucifix, a blue laced canopy, and an open coffin totally immersed in flowers. Immediately we are served with coffee and cake from the kitchen where a whole crowd seem to be coming and going – Jesus arriving at the home of Mary and Martha comes to mind. I take my turn to look at the body. Rafael, a young man lies still and very much at peace, but I now know the story of his dying, and what preceded this present stillness.

‘Over the four hours between 10.00 am and 2.00 pm there are a variety of speeches, times of singing, prayers, and so on. The story of Lazarus from John is read and this becomes connected in my own mind with Lazarus and the rich man in Luke. David is asked to speak and, in his address, something of the full disgrace of Raphael’s story begins to emerge. Rafael had first complained of a bad knee more than seven months ago, and since that time has received expensive medication with little success. At times the family were producing 80 colones a day for medicine. Eventually he was admitted to hospital for eight days, at much further cost, only to be told bluntly that he had cancer (now throughout his body) and that he would not live. Further palliative treatment was offered at 6,000 colones, several months income. The family refused, and Rafael died a few days later.

‘David told a powerful story about Rafael, as a young boy full of wisdom for the world – how on a day out he had saved one of his tortillas and his cheese ‘in case they were needed’; and later in

the day, when everyone else was hot and thirsty, how he shared them with the whole group. This, in the context, it became so clear, is precisely the wisdom the world needs: the ability to share; but it has been squeezed off the world's agenda, and one result is Rafael's own death.

'I find myself continuing to reflect on the martyrs, such a prominent theme in El Salvador, and the sense in which all the world's 'poor' are martyred (they both die at the hands of the rich, and their dying cries out in testimony to the world about the truth of God). I am able to share in this funeral of a boy I have never known in many ways. I am privileged to allow his life to touch mine, I am able to share, even if only in a tiny way, the grief of the parents, and I can see Rafael as a representative of all the world's children who die from the neglect of the rich. It is a potent experience, another martyr demands of me a change in my life. I am a long way from home, and I cannot but make connections with my own fear about the deaths of those I love – and strangely they help the fear to ease rather than to sharpen it.

'The long walk, the whole breadth of the town, is deeply moving – a couple of hundred people slowly but deliberately pacing up and down the hills following a grotesque mechanical hearse, its engine purring in the heat of the midday sun (a dated relic of US technology, discarded, and now another focus for extortion of the poor). It is very hot. All the way there is the rhythmic singing of choruses and songs. At the cemetery there is another long session of talking, with many speakers. Eventually the coffin is pushed sideways into the tomb, it is filled with flowers and we all watch as two young boys mix cement and brick up the entrance. There is a great sense of finality – and all within twenty hours of his death (2.00 pm Friday). These rituals of death are very profound – how ridiculous seems the question, so often asked in the 'let's pretend' society of modern Britain, whether young children should be present. There is wailing and visible agony for one of his sisters, but when the ritual of entombment is complete there is a feeling of peace – at least for this moment – though the burden of pain will stay for a life-time. As Baptist Pastor José Arturo Benitez, Raphael's father, and Rosa, his mother, stood together by the coffin

in their small house earlier in the day, Arturo had apologized to the crowd for his failure to order his words, but, as he said, his heart was broken.

‘I am thinking that when I write my report of this experience in El Salvador I would like to dedicate it to Rafael, allowing him to be the representative witness of all those poor who, after the abuse of the rich, continue to be witnesses for life to the likes of me.

‘We ride back to his home on the back of an open lorry, children and old women together – these people are strong – and after final farewells we make the long ride back to San Salvador.’

I did make that dedication, and I determined to speak Rafael’s name as often as I could amongst the powerful; to let him testify through his death, thinking that in that way I might just make one tiny contribution to the outworking of his resurrection to eternal life. So some time later, when I had a rare opportunity to preach in the Chapel of King’s College, Cambridge, it was Rafael’s story which formed the core narrative of the sermon. There he was, penniless Rafael of Sesuntepeque, alongside the priceless Rubens’ *Adoration of the Magi*. My experience is that Rafael speaks again and again as he lives in the story which is told ‘in memory of him’.

Allowing our Stories to Meet

So these are just two of the stories, now from amongst many, of Baptists who have for me become a deep well from which to draw in shaping my own way of seeing the world and seeking to be a Christian disciple in it. Although I sometimes feel that these experiences came rather late in my own theological pilgrimage, it is strange to reflect on the way that the different parts of our journey all seem, in the end, to connect up. Their stories meet my story, and strangely all our lives unfold.

Way back in 1972, I had a pre-college year as Lay Pastor of Waterbeach Baptist Church near Cambridge, and my second memorable predecessor in that place (if we count Charles Haddon Spurgeon as the first) was a man called Derek Winter. He had gone from Waterbeach to Brazil with the Baptist Missionary Society, but soon hit tragedy when his wife died as the result of a

road accident and he found himself bringing up a large family alone. My attention was ready to be aroused therefore when, still in the early 1970s a book came out by Derek entitled *Hope in Captivity*,¹ which for English-speaking audiences was a ground-breaking work, popular in style, describing his return to Latin America many years later: this time to meet some of the now great names in liberation theology (Gutierrez, Camara, Bonino, and so on). As I read it I sensed that something of real importance was trying to prise its way into my life, but I did not have the resources or the connecting links to make much of it at that time. By 1976, however, in my first full pastorate I was linking my thoughts, back through Derek Winter, and writing about Jürgen Moltmann's then hot-off-the-press *Theology of Hope*.² Now the world, the church, and even I have come a long way since those days, but there is a chain of connection which it seems to me is important in *my* Baptist story.

For the remainder of this paper, I have no intention to rehearse what ought to be familiar ground for many, re-tracing the global story of theologies of liberation. We can do that with the help of books like Chris Rowland's *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*,³ which has an excellent bibliography and notes on guided reading; or, if it feels safer in Baptist hands, we can follow Michael Bochenski's Regent's Park Study Guide, *Theology from Three Worlds*;⁴ or we can read any one of a number of significant Orbis publications. For my own part I am going to stay with the rather oblique view which is gained from the particular perspective of Baptist communities and Baptists who have been in some ways near to themes which have emerged in theologies of liberation. I want to ask if we can identify particular themes of connection which might be intrinsic to the relationship between Baptists and theologies of liberation; and I want to ask what these might have to say for a contemporary 'Baptist manifesto' or a 'possible Baptist agenda'. As I do this I try to make connections back into the particular stories I have already told of just a few Baptists within the world church.

A Baptist Manifesto?

At their core, it seems to me that theologies of liberation are concerned with transformation: the transformation which accompanies a properly contextualized critique of power structures. The process is one of deconstruction and potential reconstruction and, as such, has the same shape

as the story of death and resurrection. The process is rarely linear. It is not like reading off from a text and saying, 'I know what that means'; rather, it is typically cyclic or dialectical, with text and context inter-changing and re-surfacing as they play off each other, registering and fueling the process of transformation. And being an expression of God's bias to the poor, the transformation is properly born amongst, owned by and energized by the poor themselves, whoever they might be. Amongst theologies of liberation I am including political, feminist and black theologies, theologies concerned with age, sexual orientation, disability and everything that touches the lives of those who in a particular context, local or global, have been socially constructed as marginal or oppressed.

Much of the best known work has understandably focused on institutional (macro) structures; but theologies of liberation can also be focused through their implications for personal discipleship, which are many and deeply challenging, not least for rich individuals like me. Rarely can the detail of one theological journey be transported from one context to another. Many common themes have emerged, but there is no single hymnsheet, and much still needs to be done if theologies of liberation are to find any credible expression in first world as well as third world contexts.

All of this further connects with our shared story as Baptists. It has always seemed utterly obvious to me, perhaps naïvely, that Baptists should find something of a natural home in liberation circles, even though many Baptists have been resistant and remain deeply suspicious. Surely, at the very least, it is fair to say that our Baptist parents in the faith, as they dialogued with their inherited context, became bold deconstructors of the highly inappropriate power structures which they found in a hierarchical church. What we see happening in the early years is, if nothing else, a striking exploration of patterns of personal and corporate discipleship which challenge the authority of leaders and ecclesiastical regulations. We see them take a risk with the open possibilities which arise when 'church' is allowed to develop much more organically, with strong attention to the reality of shifting contexts, fired by energy from the 'roots' below rather than from 'authorities' coming from above.

In all this, it seems to me, there are a number of key themes which have been crucially significant for Baptists, and which arise afresh in theologies of liberation. However, it is fair to say that, with the growing institutionalization of a Baptist denomination, it has sometimes become less easy for us to recog-

nize these themes for what they are. We have been tempted to mistake vitality as threat, too often preferring the familiar and the seemingly stable.

So I let me gather some thoughts under the five thematic headings of Scripture, Community, Mission (which teams up with Liberty), Discipleship and lastly Conversion.

Scripture

Baptists have always treasured the Scriptures, and looked confidently to them as the reliable, though not necessarily the only, place to look in community with others for insight and inspiration. This makes sense in terms of our origins; Scripture made a central, if not exclusive, contribution to the new proposal of early Baptists, covenanting with God and with each other through their baptism as believers into new forms of communal discipleship. And it is so very important to remember that our love of Scripture has not always been associated with forms of what today we think of as conservative strategies of interpretation. For much of their history, Baptists have been represented at the leading edge of radical biblical scholarship; we have produced some of the great pioneers, at a peak perhaps in the heyday of the historical-critical method, especially in Old Testament.

How inspiring then to find movements and individuals in the late twentieth century sharing that same thirst for scripture read in community, trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit for interpretation. I think, for example, of Ernesto Cardenal at Solentiname in Nicaragua,⁵ and Ched Myers in the Hispanic communities of Los Angeles.⁶ I shall never forget the moment when I dropped in on a community Bible Study at Perquín high in the mountains of Morezan in El Salvador; or when I joined a small, mainly Roman Catholic, team creating study materials for communities living in shanties perched on the edge of the sewers which drain the city of San Salvador. These were people of enormous vitality of faith, and unswerving devotion to Scripture as I have never seen outdone in any Baptist community anywhere.

I have heard some amazingly liberating Baptist sermons too: from Soli, a young black African layperson preaching in a shanty on 'The Rich Young Ruler' from the Gospels (Luke 18:18-23), and from Sepetla, a ministerial student from Soweto powerfully bringing to life Old Testament texts in the deconstruction of unjust structures affecting his people. The crux in each

instance was the same: courage to read the Bible genuinely in context, and courage to let the Scriptures deconstruct the powers-that-be in the name of the gospel of Christ.

It was out of her knowledge of Scripture, and the steeping of her life in it, that Maria knew what it was right to do for God, and that Mamelodi Baptist Church knew it was right to work at it with her. It was Scripture which fueled the faith of José Arturo, and which became the connecting link between the appalling tragedy of Rafael's death, and my understanding of it.

Community

From the start Baptists joined other dissenters in pioneering new patterns of community; if I have understood it aright, they created a distinctive form of congregationalism which subtly avoids the trap of isolation by embracing broader patterns of inter-dependence. Once again it is responsiveness to context which is crucial and determines at each level (local district, regional association, national union, continental federation or world alliance) the appropriate structure for decision-making and agenda for mission. I sometimes try to bring back to mind the acute and joyful sense of discovery when I first visited a gathered or community church (actually, St Andrew's Street Baptist Church in Cambridge) back in 1969. The memory re-surfaced again many years later as a member in a Baptist/Anglican LEP, where the contrast between the locally contextualized and the hierarchically governed became sharply focused; let no-one say that ecumenical contexts blur denominational identity!

How inspiring, then, to come upon new models of local community organization emerging on the world church agenda: the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Their origins may be traced to a mixture of motives (a lack of Catholic priests, a revolutionary Marxist movement), but the outcome carries a stirringly prophetic message to all other forms of church. I remember my first reading of Leonardo Boff's book *Ecclesiogenesis*⁷ and having an intuitive sense that I was handling an essentially Baptist vision of church. Nowhere have I seen church happen with more intensity and vitality than in local community settings: Sesuntepeque and Perquín in El Salvador, Mamelodi in South Africa, and so on.

What I treasure most today as a Baptist is the potential in such models of

community – not because of any desire for parochiality, but because of their potential for wide ranging prophetic initiatives.

Mission

Mission has always been integral to Baptist ways of being, though it has not always been focused, I suspect, in ‘evangelism’ as recently conceived. Participation in the *missio dei*, sharing in what God is about, is unlikely to be predominantly about making many new churches. The world has enough churches to last it a month of Sundays! It just has to be about setting people free to be the people God made them to be (individually, communally and globally) – free to be, to live, to believe. We read about the *missio dei* in the stories of Scripture, especially the Gospels, and most especially in the narratives of the passion of Jesus. Baptists have from early days had a strong commitment to religious liberty (that is what you would expect, given the historical context out of which we arose); but this was never simply a matter of liberty for ourselves, those with whom we agree, but for everyone.

How telling, therefore, to find precisely such a holistic vision for mission born out of contexts inspired by theologies of liberation. I recall a service in which I shared at Mamelodi Baptist Church, in which a young woman gave a most remarkable testimony. At first it was quite a ‘normal’ testimony to conversion and the spiritual power of God in her life; but then, in a way I have never heard in Britain, in calling others to discipleship it included testimony to the way a young child in their family had regained sight by a corneal graft, and how Christians should, therefore, make sure their organs are available for donation at the point of death. That is a holistic approach to the gospel and to mission. It is the same theme as became clear in Maria’s story.

Discipleship

Baptist attention to the individual believer has been and is important; but this does not need to be exclusively individualistic. Too often spirituality and the gospel have been focused as ‘me and my salvation journey’, whereas authentic discipleship is about action in mission, life-style; it is a political stance whether we like it or not. The premise is ‘what I do matters’, not because it is some trade-off in the quest for eternity, nor because it enables some point-

scoring on the table of righteousness, but simply *because*

One theme of discipleship frequently heard in Latin American experience can be deeply disturbing for us in the west. That is, the context has often brought back to the centre the role of martyrdom (not ever something to be sought, the young church knew that), as something which sets the shape and standard, the bottom-line, for discipleship. The ultimate question for faith simply has to be, 'What would you die for?'

It was an extraordinary experience for me as theological teacher to visit the garden of remembrance for the Jesuit teachers and their two housekeepers at the UCA (University of Central America) in San Salvador. In the small museum is a single item which stopped me in my tracks and remains printed on my memory. It is a copy of Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Crucified God*,⁸ in Spanish, stained with blood. It fell from the shelf the night the military invaded the seminary, and it soaked up from the floor some of the blood of one of the martyred teachers, its most recent reader. Nowhere in the world have I seen more clearly discipleship deeply rooted in the Jesus tradition; nowhere have I seen a more vital image of resurrection and life.

Conversion

Lastly I want to focus on conversion; for that is a term well-loved of Baptists, and a term which theologies of liberation have also often chosen to associate with the decision actively to take up the way of Jesus, the martyrdom track, through alignment with God's preferential option for the poor. That was what Fanyana was testifying to after the mass funeral in Mamelodi.

In one sense the poor (a term which here embraces every form of powerlessness) do not need such a 'conversion'. The option has already been taken for them. But for the rich it is something else. It is that thing which Jesus named to the Rich Young Ruler. To accept God's option for the poor may mean the relinquishing of power; at the very least it means making such power as is ours a source of empowerment for others so that they might effect the transformations they alone know to be needed. And for the rich like me it often does not get far beyond a first step in recognizing that it is the poor who are God's primary witnesses, and are the only ones who are able to teach us all we are ever likely to know about who God is.

Fanyana, Maria, Soli, José Arturo, Rafael, the Jesuit martyrs ... and a host

of others: these I confess have been my own most significant theological teachers. This call for the conversion of the rich, then, bites at every point where dualism reigns; for where there are two, it has proven to be consistently human that one must dominate (two genders, two sexual orientations, two religions ...). Never let it be said that liberation theologies are soft on sin; nowhere have I found a sharper understanding of the real potency of sin, with its corporate power to dominate and de-humanize.

But the question, 'What then shall I do to inherit eternal life?', never gets any easier.

A Possible Baptist Agenda

Let me try to draw this paper together by setting down some of the parameters which, for myself and others, might helpfully shape a liberating Baptist agenda.

1. There will always be a proper measure of tentativeness associated with our beliefs. This is not because these do not grasp us deeply, but because we know we cannot possibly yet have heard all there is to hear concerning them.
2. At the bottom line, we know that it is only God's poor ones who can be our real teachers; so we are going to major on listening rather than speaking, offering as I suggested earlier that 'effort of attention' which is profoundly respectful of every other human companion.
3. We shall be specially attentive to matters of power. It is not that power can be evaded or avoided, but we know how easily its use slides into abuse. I myself constantly struggle with much that is popular in contemporary Baptist life. I despair at the constant return to the theme of numbers, as if the number of Christians in a particular society were *the* key indicator by which to measure how the coming Kingdom makes its presence felt. I also despair over the struggles for power, which have demanded my attention everywhere I have travelled in the Baptist world. I am amazed that men present in a room full of women speaking about women's liberation can still be heard jostling, shouting even, to make their voices heard; or white people can be heard speaking over the top of black voices testifying to their experience of racism in Britain. I find it all makes me want to go rather silent, to shun each and every position

of power, to swim against the stream – ultimately, to want to reject all forms of institutional church.

4. At the end of the day, however, I and others do well to stay. Why? because one of the things that Baptists and all those committed to theologies of liberation have in common is a proper sense of dissent, a non-conformism, which always keeps us living near an edge. The danger with edges, of course, is that it is all too easy to fall off; but it is, I believe, on the edge where the reality of God has been and is most strongly made known.

5. So it is right that Baptists continue to work broadly within the frameworks we inherit, and to put such power as we have behind and alongside those who can genuinely help to make us the people's church we are called to be. Always we shall strive to enable that peculiar community of equals, which we find uniquely modelled in the example of Jesus.

These five guidelines, it seems to me, begin to mark out something of the proper relationship between our Baptist roots and some theologies of liberation.

Notes

- ¹ Derek Winter, *Hope in Captivity* (London: Epworth Press, 1977).
- ² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967).
- ³ Christopher Rowland, *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).
- ⁴ Michael Bochenski, *Theology from Three Worlds* (Oxford: Regent's Park College/Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997).
- ⁵ Ernesto Cardenal, *Love in Practice: The Gospel in Solentiname* (London: Search Press, 1977).
- ⁶ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988).
- ⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology* (London: Collins, 1986).
- ⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. M. Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1974).

Baptist reflections on theology and preaching

MICHAEL QUICKE

Discontent with Preaching

As surely as Reformation convictions burst forth in the preaching of Scripture and the doctrine of justification, so seventeenth century Baptists emerged as preachers. Baptists came preaching. Thomas McKibbens describes the earliest Baptist preachers as ‘theologically radical, politically dangerous, ecclesiastically Nonconformist ... they preached sermons that spoke so clearly to their age that they often found themselves in prison.’¹ Four remarkable early preachers – John Smyth, Henry Jessey, Hanserd Knollys and Henry Denne – receive the accolade, ‘men of the greatest learning and piety’.² Remarking that Baptist polity enables any believer to emerge as a preacher, and noting how risky such a practice may be, he comments about these early years that ‘the strength of the denomination was found among those....who provided a preaching model that united both evangelism and scholarship.’

Many will find it difficult even to think in similar terms about the denomination today. Is its strength to be found among preachers who model such a combination of evangelism and scholarship? Hardly. We tend to prize leadership, community building and goal attaining. We are more likely to puzzle about what exactly the exercise of preaching in the twenty-first century could possibly have in common with that of the seventeenth. Have not circumstances altered so dramatically that heroic descriptions of early Baptist preaching have no more than wistful historic interest? Instead of hostile persecution which pushed early Baptists to the margins of an established church, these spiritually indiscriminate times have thrust Baptists, with other Christians, into a *pot pourri* of religious possibilities which may or, more likely, may not provide some private satisfactions. Public Christian faith with its coherent

world view has to fight against the pervasive belittling and privatizing tendencies in which our pluralistic society specializes. In the considered opinion of many, preaching is not the way to win this fight.

Conventional preaching seems to have few friends apart from a small core of committed practitioners and a slightly larger group of the already convicted hearers. Though there are notable exceptions, much preaching is too often like worn gongs and cymbals banging out truths to static or dwindling congregations who have heard it all before and manifest little evidence of ever having been changed for good. And all the time the great majority of the population hear the banging behind closed doors and leave us to what they assume are harmless private pursuits. Our services of worship may still claim to focus on God's preached word with its wide dimensions of 'preaching good news to the poor...proclaiming freedom for the prisoners...recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed' (Luke 4.18) but we seem to end up talking to ourselves in smaller and smaller circles. John Drane, speaking to the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship meeting at the Baptist Assembly in 1999, commented that 'for the most part we are communicating the faith in ways which are accessible to nobody except ourselves'. The headline given the report of his talk in the Baptist Times read: 'It's time to bring the preaching to an end.'³

With these levels of discontent it is no surprise that many of us who are involved in preaching are wrestling with the challenge of how to be more effective communicators. Plenty of solutions are being promoted. Some want to reject preaching wholesale. Eloquenty, D. C. Norrington⁴ pleads for a cessation of conventional sermons. He argues that classic sermons are a spiritual health hazard which actually de-skill the congregation. He claims that they are not biblical in origin but rather have emerged from egotistical Greek and Roman rhetorical practices. For him, sermons are far better replaced by teaching within cell groups. Others seek to combine conventional messages with multi-media presentations. Roger Standing has recently described the multi-media style developed in his own church using video clips, computer graphics and audio files. 'It is', he reports, 'singly the most exciting, energizing and fulfilling thing that I have done in the last decade. It has meant developing a whole new range of skills in "preaching"'.⁵ Yet others advocate dialogue preaching which genuinely involves congregational participation.⁶ In reaction to this, yet others argue that the only way ahead is to reinforce clas-

sical expository preaching.⁷ The hunt is on for treating the sickness of so much current preaching.

A Baptist reflection

The title of this paper deliberately includes the word 'Baptist'. Already, as I have sketched out, there is a great deal of current literature on preaching which is offered from many points of view. It contains many analyses of the state of preaching and suggestions for ways forward. However, the significant starting point for me, and for many who will read this, is Baptist identity with the specific context that belonging within the Baptist tradition provides. Because of our distinctive commitment to live under the Word of God together, gathered as believers focused on word and sacrament, a community comprising those who have been baptized or who are on the way to baptism, we of all people should stress the *corporate* nature of the preaching event.

God creates preachers within the worshipping gathered community. Listeners are not there as passive sounding boards to echo Amen. They are not reactive partners chosen primarily because they have two ears. They are chosen by God, gathered under God's word, joined together in baptismal community as God's covenant people. For the preacher, hearers are not called 'audience' but *congregation*.

Thomas Long has recently stressed how the preacher is best seen as a *witness* to and from within the congregation. 'Preaching and the community of faith, then, are reciprocal realities. Those who hear and believe the witness to Christ in preaching are thus gathered into the community of faith that continues to tell, to teach, and to celebrate that witness.'⁸ It is this dynamic which Baptists should particularly understand. The preaching event does not depend on an individual preacher out there, but upon a witness preacher within a community which is shaped by the preached word because Christ is in the midst. Preaching and community *are* reciprocal realities. The sickness of preaching is not to be cured by individual remedies to render the preacher more interactive, narrative or multi-media in style. Rather the hope for effective preaching lies in the involvement of preacher and listeners in shared life together in Christ, shaped by God's word. Christian preaching, at its best, is a biblical speaking/listening/doing event which is empowered to form Christ-

shaped people and communities.

A peculiar language

Let us return to the contrast which has been drawn between audience and congregation. An audience requires an accessible performance. The words chosen to communicate need to come from the public arena and speakers will be rewarded with varying degrees of attention. Many of the recent rhetorical moves in homiletics have been at pains to accommodate the language of theology to 'public language'. This is intended to make gospel truths accessible. Advocates of so-called 'plotted moves' models of preaching have offered inductive preaching, narrative preaching and round-table preaching as 'representing' the gospel in ways which make sense within contemporary culture. Within contemporary fast-moving and highly visual communication patterns, preachers are urged to design the shape of Christian truth so that it is soluble and digestible. It too should become fast-moving and visual spoken with narrative shape, or with 'moves', as David Buttrick terms them.⁹

No one should doubt the significance of designing the preached word so that it is heard effectively in the power of the Spirit. As the preacher William Sangster put it: 'The Holy Spirit never excuses hard work.' However, a congregation is formed for a different purpose from other groups in society. It comprises men and women in a faith community. It should not be ashamed of a different language.

This is well expressed by William Willimon in a distinctly subversive book *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptised*.¹⁰ In this he argues that we should rediscover the distinctive language of the baptized community. As a Methodist, he has timely words for Baptists as he pleads with passion for peculiar speech which evokes a new people out of nothing. We need to understand, as he puts it, that 'we talk funny'. Elsewhere he writes of the 'weirdness of the gospel'.¹¹ He rightly critiques elements of the rhetorical movement. With its overwhelming desire to be easily understood, it is in peril of so compromising with contemporary culture that it qualifies the scandal of Christian speech and it ends up with little that is not heard elsewhere. To those who claim that we have taken ourselves and our ecclesial speech too seriously, making it private and marginal, he claims that baptismal speech and only baptismal

speech produces Christian formation and Christian community: 'While preaching struggles for connections, associations between my life and the world of the gospel, it also expects disassociation, gaps and tension between my story and the gospel.' This he calls baptismal preaching, political preaching, in which our homiletical effort is better spent helping contemporary culture to be relevant to the gospel. As he puts it typically: 'the homiletical question for early Christian communicators was not: should we use Greek? Or how should I utilize Hellenistic concepts? But: how shall we be a sign, signal and witness to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord?'

At the beginning I quoted McKibben's description that the early Baptist preachers were 'theologically radical, politically dangerous, ecclesiastically Nonconformist', and that 'they preached sermons that spoke so clearly to their age that they often found themselves in prison.' This resonates with the claims that Willimon is making for sharp-edged preaching to the baptized which names the reality of being new creation in Christ. In the reciprocal realities of preaching and community of faith the eventfulness of the preaching event broadens itself so that the whole gathered church preaches out the characteristics of being theologically radical, politically dangerous and ecclesiastically Nonconformist. In the Baptist story it is not just preachers who will find themselves in prison.

The whole point is that the preacher's language *has* to be peculiar because all the hearers should either have been baptized into Christ or be on the way to being baptized. The more distinctive becomes our understanding of corporate baptismal reality, of our being united in Christ's body and of responding to his Kingdom life together, the more congregational life contrasts with contemporary culture. And the more the language of the preacher needs to be dissonant.

Preaching with the community

We need to be rebuked again about all tendencies to individualize and spiritualize. In the baptismal act there is so much more than a testimony of a candidate's personal faith. Of course it does matter that believers give reason for the hope that is within them. But as a public act before witnesses to total immersion in God's grace and call, baptism initiates into a corporate world

view which embraces everything we are and do together. Similarly, in the preaching act there is so much more than one person's declaration of God's truth. In Willimon's language it is political. Preachers are proclaiming and witnessing within Christ's new reality. When the Christian is asked to say something reasonable there should be no fudging the profound counter challenge: 'Repent and be baptized.'

This deep dissonance which forms distinctive community flies in the face of society's need for self esteem. Baptists, of all communities, should resist mirroring the aspirations of twenty-first western pluralists. Instead of 'sermonettes by preacherettes for Christianettes' with pulpit speech that is pious, trivial, moralistic and individualistic, we need to preach with 'a sense of largeness.' That change requires us to take the context of baptism and discipleship so seriously that it refuses to accept the world as it is. Again, as Willimon challenges us, 'the toughest evangelistic task we have as preachers is not how to make Jesus make sense in a disbelieving modern world, but where, when he meets us in our world as we believe that he does, we will follow him or not.'

Ineffective preaching often reveals an impoverished quality of relationship between preacher and congregation. Baptists should be well placed to work through the issues of how a preacher emerges from within the community so that the act of preaching is not only rooted in shared lived experience but its outcome is in a faith community of contrast. Our reflection on preaching within community should not lead to more banging on worn out gongs and cymbals. This is a call for the whole community to participate in the peculiar language and reality of being a baptized people.

Dietrich Ritschl develops his thesis that 'the whole Church is called to participate in the office of proclamation which is held by Jesus Christ alone' with a provocative understanding of how church members should be involved.¹² As he argues that the whole Church participates in the ministry of Christ and therefore in his proclamation, 'it must very definitely be said that the preacher cannot be left alone with his [sic] sermon preparation. He can only preach after having heard the Word, but he cannot hear the Word when he is alone and isolated from his people in his study.' In practical terms this means a process which is concerned about both preparation and outcomes and which was partly developed by Donald Coggan: 'Ideally...preaching should be followed by discussion when further truth will be teased out, and preacher and

people will both be enriched.’¹³ It is this mutual enrichment that is needed today as preachers dare to use peculiar language for the sake of the people of God and also for society which needs the challenge of dissonance in the living of Christ’s faith community.

I believe that there is an urgent need for Baptists to seize the initiative for contemporary corporate preaching events in which preachers and congregations together hear the word of God. Our ecclesiology predisposes us to express the distinctive language of the baptized community. Our experience as believers focused on word and sacrament provides just such a context for preaching which has a ‘sense of largeness’ and distinctiveness to shape community and disturb society.

Signals in experience

For fourteen years before I became Principal at Spurgeon’s, I was minister at St. Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge. In writing this article I was challenged by one of my fellow Principals to reflect on where there were echoes of its affirmations in the demanding weekly grind of a city-centre ministry as I had engaged in it. Most preachers find it relatively easy to make high-sounding claims about their work but sadly these are often sabotaged by the dull tones of the reality itself. Could there be even the faintest traces, muted signals in recent practical experience, that preacher and people can move into deeper understandings and experiences *together*?

It is not uncommon for preachers to remember certain positive phases of church life as characterized by different sermon series and themes which appeared to have a discernible intensity and momentum. Often these seem to coincide with significant events in the life of the local church. They remember preaching through Nehemiah as the community faced a building project, or developing a mission series to challenge the church in its local witness. Or they remember preaching on themes clustering around the doctrine of the Holy Spirit when the church was rocking under the impact of charismatic renewal. Of course it always remains possible that a preacher recalls such stages of church life with far greater enthusiasm than others do. A wider reflection which includes other members of the congregation is also needed for a balanced assessment.

For me and many people at St. Andrew's Street there is one particular period for preaching potency that seems to have been genuinely influential in the story of individuals and community. It dates from the beginning of 1990. Already, ten years of working, planning and preaching had led to the congregation's developing a mission centre alongside the church sanctuary. Open seven days a week, we intended to flesh out on Mondays through to Saturdays the gospel claims which were preached each Sunday. We called it 'the laboratory next door' in which to work out our Christian faith and commitment practically. There was no doubt that many had given financially, and we had already committed volunteers to the befriending activities of this new vision.

It was my practice to invite other members of the ministry team and the deacons to work on preaching themes in the weeks before the commencement of each three month period. Themes were then presented to the whole church meeting for endorsement before being publicized. Sometimes, the weekly house groups were encouraged to coordinate their Bible studies alongside these Sunday sermons. This mutual agreement is one obvious practical way in which Baptist ecclesiology can stimulate corporate responsibility for preaching. Before the beginning of 1990 there was thus already a process that brought us to a conviction that we all needed to be challenged by living within the Kingdom of God. Christ's holistic call to Kingdom life was seen by many to place our busy church life in its proper perspective. Together we needed to see God's bigger picture in Cambridge. Without articulating it, there was a growing sense that we were not dissonant enough in our words and actions. True, individuals were coming to faith, and individuals were expressing their commitment in action. But we believed that God's vision involved all of us in community in fresh ways. A series was signalled: *The Upside Down Kingdom*. We wanted to engage with Jesus' kingdom teaching in Cambridge in the 1990's.

From the outset there was a freshness and openness which surprised us. First, it caught *out* preacher and people with a disturbing unpredictability as we faced the task, earlier described by Willimon – 'not how to make Jesus make sense in a disbelieving modern world, but where, when he meets us in our world as we believe that he does, we will follow him or not.' Then it caught us *up* into making unpredictable responses together. There was a gusting veracity of Word in community which drew us into deeper places of living

together.

The first sermon, based on the Magnificat, was called 'Down is Up' (Luke 1. 46-53):

'Most of us are conventional, happily fixed in our own culture where we've been brought up to do certain things in certain ways. So we try to make Jesus conventional and predictable too. We play safe, and over-spiritualize, concentrating on the comforting words of Jesus. If we come across revolutionary words we try to avoid their practical implications which might affect us socially, morally, politically, economically.....'

How many times have we said something like that? But what made this different was a sense of engagement, so that somehow we all felt as though we were travelling towards new experiences as community. We were moving towards a freshly discovered edge of living in the kingdom. I confess that sermon titles sound hackneyed and the choice of texts was itself predictable. Yet we found ourselves pushed into discoveries together. 'Blessed are the poor' (Luke 6.20), was followed by 'Losers Finders' at a baptismal service (Matt. 16.21-28). Other titles were 'Loveable enemies' (Luke 6.27-35), 'Easy Yokes' (Matt. 11.25-12.8), 'Last is first' (Mark 9.33-37,10.13-16), 'Low is High' (John 13.1-17), 'Peace with a Sword' (Matt. 10.32-42), and 'Unseen is seen' (Matt. 6.1-8,10.24-31, 2 Cor. 4.16-18).

A refrain was growing Sunday by Sunday. 'When Christ comes among us he turns everything that people thought about life upside down. Something new is happening among us, right now...God says, "My kingdom is here. It's a kingdom of love and service. The least are the greatest, outcasts are welcomed, adults become like children, enemies love each other, leaders are servants of others....."' A new subversive yet infectious tone was now discernible in our church life, in its worship, group meetings and in its commitments.

Some outcomes were specific and obvious. The whole fellowship in its monthly church meeting committed itself to shelter some of the homeless in the main hall of the church. Fifty volunteers, many from our own church, offered to form teams to sleep on the premises. The testimonies of new believers preparing for baptism spoke authentically of that wider dimension of belonging to a Kingdom people with Christ doing things in our midst. Visitors expressed joy at a tangible quality of togetherness in worship which led

to 'service beyond services'. And as the main preacher I found myself both bruised and sustained by the demands of preaching to myself and my community in new ways which exposed me to upside-down ways of living there and then. At no time can I recall such disturbing personal wrestling, such vulnerability, and such answering grace in God's truth.

As I reflect on this dramatic experience, through which the life and ministry of the church enlarged, I realize how much depended on a quality of relationship between preacher and congregation. I cannot underestimate the impact that a serious illness of mine had on the congregation in earlier years, and the consequent drawing together in prayers for my recovery and my rehabilitation. There is no doubting that the sense of urgency this brought, and the sheer deliciousness of being alive together for God, reinforced the distinctiveness of our being gathered together. But I am convinced that whenever preacher and congregation treasure relationships together there are glorious possibilities of living as whole communities participating in God's peculiar language and his distinctive gift of life. This remains his call to all preachers and their communities everywhere.

Notes

- 1 Thomas R. McKibbens: *The Forgotten Heritage. A Lineage of Great Baptist Preaching* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), p. 4.
- 2 From Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists*, as quoted by McKibbens, op. cit.
- 3 John Drane, quoted in the *Baptist Times*, 8 July, 1999.
- 4 David C. Norrington, *To Preach or not to Preach? The Church's Urgent Question* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1996).
- 5 Roger Standing, 'So, what in heaven's name is Christertainment?', *Mainstream Magazine* 65 (November 1999).
- 6 Stuart Murray, 'Interactive Preaching' *Evangel* 17/2 (Summer 1999).
- 7 Stephen F. Olford, with David L. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Boradman and Holman, 1998).

- ⁸ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), p. 47.
- ⁹ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
- ¹⁰ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech. Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
- ¹¹ William H. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word. Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 37.
- ¹² Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 2.
- ¹³ Donald Coggan, *A New Day for Preaching. A Sacrament of the Word* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 30-4.

- Rosemary Kidd *Eschatological Reversal of Rich and Poor in Luke-Acts*
 Vivienne Lassetter & Graham Sparks *In Search of the Saints*
 Paul Martin *The Child and the Church*
 Kathryn Morgan *A Search for the Significance of Small Groups*
 Tony Peck *The Missionary Congregation*
 Geoffrey Roper *Church and Establishment*
 Peter Shepherd *Associating and Superintendency*
 Hazel Sherman *'Mixed Blessings': An Exploration of Biblical Preaching
 in an Age of Options*
 Michael Smith *The Gospel in an Age of Decay*
 David Taylor *The Baptism of Believers and Church Membership*
 Anthony Thacker *The Changing Face of Science Fiction in the 1990s*
 Paul Walker *Revd Peter Thomas Stanford (1860-1909), Birmingham's
 Coloured Preacher*
 Graham Watts *The Spirit and Community: Trinitarian Pneumatology and
 the Church*
 Sean Winter *The Rhetoric of Reversal in the Pauline Epistles:
 Philippians 3 and Paul's Polemic against Jerusalem*
 Nick Wood *Inculturating the Gospel in Postmodern Britain*

In addition, the following Plenary Sessions took place:

- Richard Kidd, Paul Fiddes and Brian Haymes *Doing Theology for the
 Churches*
 Paul Fiddes and Brian Haymes *Is There a Distinctive Baptist Way of
 Doing Theology?*
 Richard Kidd *Baptists and Theologies of Liberation*
 Michael Quicke *Theology and Communication of the Faith*
 Professor Sarah Coakley *The Spirit as Subversion: Prayer, Sexuality
 and Gender*

Copies of all the papers given are deposited in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford

The cover shows two historic examples of doing theology in a Baptist way. 'The Mystery of Iniquity' by Thomas Helwys (1612) contains the first plea for religious liberty written in English. 'The Gospel of Christ Worthy of All Acceptation' by Andrew Fuller (1785) sets out a doctrine of salvation which can be the basis for mission, and was influential in the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society.

Both books are mentioned in this study. First editions of both can be found in the Angus Library of Regent's Park College, Oxford.

THE
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FULLY to CREDIT, and CORDIALLY to APPROVE,

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WHEREIN IS CONSIDERED

The NATURE of FAITH in CHRIST,

AND THE

DUTY OF THOSE WHERE THE GOSPEL

COMES IN THAT MATTER.

By ANDREW FULLER.

GO—PREACH THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE;—HE THAT BELIEVETH, AND IS BAPTIZED, SHALL BE SAVED,—BUT HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT SHALL BE DAMNED! Mark xvi. 15, 16.

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This is the third and last booklet in a series by four Baptist ministers who have been the Principals of the four English Baptist colleges during the past decade. Following *Something to Declare. A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, and *On the Way of Trust*, this study affirms that there is indeed a way of doing theology which is rooted in the story of faith and life among Baptists. This claim is related here to Baptist identity, to the Baptist way of being a community, to theologies of liberation, and to the crisis which seems to have befallen preaching. The four contributors write personally about their theological pilgrimages, and also tell their shared story of doing theology together.

ISBN 0 9528150 9 5