

A Shared Understanding of British Baptist Identity

This paper is an attempt to explore our shared foundations of Baptist identity that might help us share fellowship and work together within God's mission.¹ It is not an attempt to replace the *Declaration of Principle*; this document assumes the *Declaration of Principle* and works with it, as it is the current document that all churches and ministers affirm.² Nor is it a confession of faith, although it is deeply theological. It is a re-presentation of key areas of what we might believe about the church, drawing on Scripture, theology and history, around which we want to gather as Baptists and which might then form the basis of a *shared* understanding of Baptist identity, shared by those in the group who have written it and offered as a shared understanding around which we might gather as a Union of churches.

We recognise that what we believe about the church sits in a framework of broader theological convictions, and what we think about the church will be shaped by all that we believe about God and all that God has done. Some aspects of this broader theology are touched upon below, but a whole variety of issues are not. A concise document cannot consider all such issues, but we all bring these wider convictions to our more focused discussion of the church. Although Baptists have at times been wary of creeds, both because of their commitment to the centrality of Scripture and because of a belief that faith had to be lived, they have wanted to ensure they stand in the wider tradition of the apostolic faith. So, for example, in the central act of baptism candidates express repentance and faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour and are baptised in the name of the triune God. Here is a dramatic enactment of central beliefs. In other traditions the historic creeds are central to expressing this faith, especially the Nicene creed, the first version of which was agreed 1700 years ago. We affirm that we stand in this apostolic tradition of the wider church expressed in the Nicene Creed and what it affirms about God. What we write here is offered within this apostolic faith in a generous spirit as a way of drawing us together.

What follows are eight themes which explore different aspects of our Baptist identity. They are all deeply interconnected, and while there is a clear order at the beginning – the paper begins with the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture – the other sections weave together as one.

1. The Lordship of Christ

The most foundational confession in the New Testament seems to be the early baptismal formula that 'Jesus is Lord'.³ Early Baptist Thomas Helwys draws on this conviction in his rejection of the English King as judge of human conscience – a role only given to Jesus as Lord

¹ The format of the paper has some echoes to that of a similar type of statement the Council of the Baptist Union made in 1948, nearly eighty years ago.

² The group was divided on whether the *Declaration of Principle* should be revised.

³ Paul sees this as the starting point for faith in Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Philippians 2:10-11.

– and the statement produced by the Baptist World Alliance to mark its centenary begins by declaring that those assembled in 2005 ‘renew our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.’⁴ This foundational statement is a confession in two ways: it is a statement of allegiance, and in the New Testament context a clear commitment to naming Jesus and not Caesar as Lord; and it is also a statement that expresses significant theological content, for to name Jesus as Lord is an expression of his divinity. For example, when Paul discusses with the Corinthians the pastoral issue of whether they should eat food sacrificed to idols⁵, he does so in the context of the Lordship of Christ. In a world that makes many claims to divinity and lordship, ‘there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ.’⁶

If the confession Jesus is Lord expresses the deity of Christ then this, together with the experience of the Holy Spirit, becomes the basis for a trinitarian understanding of God. While we do not find a full trinitarian doctrine in the small number of New Testament texts, the New Testament speaks in a trinitarian way⁷ and there are resources in the New Testament with which to build such a doctrine, and in particular the conviction of the divinity of Christ. It was the encounter with the divine Jesus that led to the development of the inherited monotheism into a trinitarian faith that then became expressed in the credal statements of the church, especially the Nicene creed.

Affirming the writer to the Hebrews’ insistence that Christ is ‘the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’⁸, when we begin with the Lordship of Christ it says something significant about our understanding of the nature of God. We understand that God is Christlike and our understanding of the nature of God, of theology in all its forms, will always have as its basis the life, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus Christ.⁹

The confession of Jesus as Lord is also the basis for how we might express our understanding of the Gospel, which at heart is another way of affirming that Jesus is Lord and Saviour, and that salvation is an act of divine grace that calls forth a response of repentance and faith. Thus, the importance of believers’ baptism, both theologically and existentially, as an ‘acted parable’ that, in the words of Henry Wheeler Robinson, testifies ‘more impressively than any verbal recital of a creed’ and functions as ‘the historical basis of *every* Christian creed’.¹⁰ This understanding of the Lordship of Christ shapes our understanding both of individuals and society; it calls forth a response from individuals to acknowledge this Lordship and live a life of discipleship but also calls for a reshaping of society so that it better expresses the Lordship

⁴ See <https://baptistworld.org/beliefs/>.

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 8.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 8:6.

⁷ For example, 2 Corinthians 13:13.

⁸ Hebrews 1:3.

⁹ See 1 Corinthians 3:11.

¹⁰ Henry Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1946), pp. 77, 80.

of Christ. The latter is often expressed in terms of the Kingdom of God, but is at heart an expression of this same foundational understanding of the Lordship of Christ.

We recognise that both historically and currently Baptists have stressed different aspects of the Lordship of Christ and this is seen both in the theological statements and the operant practices of local churches. But we share in a belief in and commitment to the Lordship of Christ as foundational to our sense of being Baptist. We uphold the importance of believers' baptism, not simply as an historical practice, but as an expression of the Gospel that unites us together.¹¹

2. The Authority of Scripture

As Baptists we gather around Scripture as of primary importance. We are individuals and communities that are built on Scripture and shaped by Scripture. We gather around the Word in Worship and Church meeting and look to Scripture to be 'a lamp for my feet'.¹² Such a commitment, though, has been and is interpreted in different ways and so needs some further discussion to ensure this can be a shared basis for our discipleship together. This is done below through naming a series of creative tensions that exist in our reading of Scripture. The language of 'creative tension' is chosen because it recognises aspects of difference within a shared commitment.

The Authority of Christ and the Authority of Scripture

A key question that theologians have long wrestled with is the relationship between Christ and the Bible, which is brought into focus when we describe both as the Word of God. Do we mean exactly the same when we describe Jesus as the living Word of God and the Bible as the written Word of God, or is language being used in different ways? The *Declaration of Principle* affirms that 'our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the sole and absolute authority... as revealed in the Holy Scriptures'; some confessions of faith, for example the basis of faith held by the Evangelical Alliance, affirm 'the supreme authority of Old and New Testament Scriptures which are the written Word of God'¹³. It would seem unhelpful to suggest that there is either no difference in these statements or that they are saying very different things, but to recognise that they sit together in a creative tension. These statements share a belief that Christ and the Bible cannot be separated. The Christ who holds authority as Lord is the Christ revealed in Scripture; the Scriptures as the written Word of God hold their authority because of the living Word of God. But there are and always have been differences in the way the Bible is described – some may want to describe it as infallible, others as trustworthy. We recognise that these differences exist among us, and that these are important and genuine differences, but they are held in creative tension with a broader commitment to the authority of Scripture and the

¹¹ See Ephesians 4:5.

¹² Psalm 119:105.

¹³ This is also the language of the Baptist World Alliance statement of faith. See <https://baptistworld.org/beliefs/>.

Lordship of Christ. We affirm again the appropriateness of the expression of the *Declaration of Principle*, that authority rests with Christ as Lord and our ultimate commitment is to him, but equally affirm that it is a commitment only to the Christ as revealed in Scripture, which is the basis for our understanding of and relationship with Christ.

The Old Testament and the New Testament

We receive the Old Testament and New Testament as Scripture together but we do not read them in the same way, recognising that the Bible itself has an internal narrative shape. The *Declaration of Principle* begins to offer an interpretive pattern with what is best described as a ‘Christological hermeneutic’. We read the whole of Scripture in the light of Christ,¹⁴ which gives priority to New Testament texts – so we look to develop churches after a New Testament pattern – and a way of reading Old Testament texts which means they remain Scripture for us¹⁵. The New Testament itself also offers examples of how New Testament writers drew on Old Testament texts. But within this creative tension there are different approaches and emphases that readers will adopt. For example, some readers may take certain Old Testament laws literally, some may look for a broader principle that can be universalised, and others may suggest they are historically important but are limited to that context. It is important to recognise that these tensions exist but that they do so within the broader commitment to read Scripture through the light of Christ.

Reading the Text and Listening to the Spirit

Alongside the suggestion of a Christological hermeneutic Baptists have also taken a ‘pneumatological approach’, for the reading of the text of Scripture happens under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ Not only do we treat the Bible differently from other books – we treat the *text as inspired*¹⁷ – we also locate a moment of inspiration in the *reading* of the Bible. The written word reveals the Living Word through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This would seem an essential understanding of Scripture as Scripture – that it is ‘alive and active’ and does its work in us through the Holy Spirit – but again brings with it its own creative tensions. How might an understanding of the passage in its original context sit with a contemporary interpretation to which a reader feels they have been led? But we affirm together the need for the text always to be read under the guidance of the Spirit as well as to be read Christologically.

Reading Scripture as Individuals and in Community

It is a privilege to read Scripture on one’s own, a privilege that not all have shared historically and some cannot access today, but we always read Scripture within the broader boundaries

¹⁴ See Luke 24.27 and John 1.45.

¹⁵ The insistence in 1 Timothy 3:16 that ‘all scripture is God-breathed’ is referring to the Old Testament.

¹⁶ See John 16:13.

¹⁷ This is again the significance of 1 Timothy 3:16.

of the Church as a community. This tension between individual and community has always existed, although expressed in different ways, and for Baptists the principal community of discernment and interpretation has been the local church, that is the gathering of Christians together to share in worship and mission. While Scripture is also interpreted when local churches gather together in Association and Union, Baptist ecclesiology (see below in the next section for further discussion) has placed most stress on the local church. This is not to ignore the place of the universal church, the great company of God's people past and present who also shape the way we read the Bible. Therefore, the personal reading of the various members of the local church sits in some creative tension with the local church as the community of discernment. Such tension might not be resolved but 'lived with', as the personal reading of some members might be at odds with the reading of the wider community on particular issues. The community and its members have to work out how and when these tensions can be held and occasionally and sadly when they cannot. We see one further tension in reading the Bible in community in the place given to accredited ministers: how their particular gifts, their knowledge of the tradition and their role as theologians in residence might be drawn on fruitfully, but in a way that they do not dominate. If ministers are gifts to the church it is still the local church that acts as the community of interpretation, reading Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ This creative tension between individuals and community and between ministers and the local church will be different in different local churches but we share a commitment to the need for individuals to engage seriously with the Bible and for the local church to be a place where the Bible is read and understood by them together.¹⁹

3. The Local Church

Our Baptist ecclesiology begins with the lordship of Christ and the local church. The particular Baptist approach insists that each local church is directly under the rule of Christ, a rule not mediated through others beyond the local church, whether the state or Bishops. Baptists have traditionally spoken of the 'gathered' church, something always valued by British Baptists, as this recognises that the initiative is always with God who gathers God's people together, and not simply human choice.²⁰ The Church is then a fellowship of believers, a community of those who have been reborn through the work of the Holy Spirit.²¹ It comprises those who have responded to the call of the Gospel, have repented and put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The church lives always through the calling and presence of the risen Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit.²² The language of the 'gathered' church has been used to stress that the church is more than a human institution, always dependent on God. Added to this more recently has been the concept that the church is 'gathering' as well as gathered, with its dynamic and missional emphasis, as some are in the process of being gathered by God. A

¹⁸ See Acts 15:28.

¹⁹ The conversation between Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8 offers an interesting model of seeking understanding of Scripture.

²⁰ See 1 Corinthians 1:9.

²¹ See John 3:3-6.

²² See for example, Jesus' promise to be in the midst of his gathered disciples in Matthew 18:20.

healthy local church always has those who are in the process of belonging; it will always be ‘gathering’, but it is built on the prior call of Christ who gathers his church, to which we respond.²³

For Baptists, the local church as a community sits under the rule of Christ, and this Lordship of Christ is held by the body. The normative entrance into the Body of Christ is through believers’ baptism, where individuals both confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour and are incorporated into this body thus joining themselves with the wider community seeking to live under the Lordship of Christ.²⁴ But understanding the whole community as living under the rule of Christ also allows space to flourish and grow for those who are not yet in a position to declare Jesus as Lord, such as children, and those who may never be able to make such a verbal confession, such as those with significant cognitive disabilities. There is, again, a creative tension here between the confession of the individual and the faith held by the wider church.

Locating the church in the call of Christ is then the basis for understanding it as a covenant community, not simply because we choose to walk together, but because this is what God requires of us through Christ’s call. The local church is thus a community of disciples gathered by Christ who watch over one another’s discipleship. While the insistence that the church is people not a building is common, there is a danger that we pay lip service to this notion. We might go further and insist that the church is not just people, but people in a particular, covenant, relationship with God and each other, a shared discipleship in response to Jesus as Lord.²⁵

A contemporary challenge in our ecclesiology is the understanding and practice of membership in a cultural context where formal membership of organisation has much less contemporary significance and our mission commitment favours ‘fuzzy’ boundaries to allow many people to name the local Baptist church as ‘their’ church. Yet the biblical metaphors of the church as chosen people, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation,²⁶ or as the body of Christ²⁷ do raise questions around where boundaries might lie and the clear commitments and responsibilities of those who belong to the body. Our churches have found different ways of navigating the specifics of membership, recognising that there is not a total overlap between formal local church membership and belonging to the Body of Christ, but we share a commitment to the importance of the local church as an expression of the body.

²³ The description of the church in 1 Peter 2 is helpful here. There is the encouragement to come (active) but that we are being built (passive) into a spiritual house; we are chosen, royal and holy and called out of darkness – all descriptions based on the work of God.

²⁴ Thus Paul’s insistence that we are all baptised into the one body by the one Spirit, 1 Corinthians 12:13.

²⁵ We might reflect on Romans 12 and Philippians 2:1-15 as exhortations to virtuous discipleship but in covenant with others.

²⁶ See 1 Peter 2:9-10, which has a strong sense of the boundaries of the church.

²⁷ Paul particular develops this in 1 Corinthians 12.

The church, as a gathered and covenant community, must then challenge some of the contemporary emphasis on the importance of individual choice. While the practice of choosing a church because it fits our theology, style or circumstances is common, behind this, theologically, must be a deeper understanding of the church as gathered by God. We should view those fellow church members as gifts of God for our discipleship. This might act as a caution against choosing a church simply because there seems to be an easy fit with own preferences. Paul's extended image of the church as the body of Christ, in 1 Corinthians, speaks of both diversity and covenant commitment. There will at times be difficult decisions to be made about where the boundaries of covenant commitment lie, but the starting point for each local church is the insistence that all members, in their significant diversity, are members of the Body of Christ, loved and valued and for whom Christ died.²⁸

Each local church, then, is competent to make its own decisions around worship, ministry and mission. Congregational discernment and accountability, such as practised in Church Meetings, are not optional extras, as if something marginal, nor are Church Meetings simply 'business' meetings of the church, but the heart of church life where Scripture should be read under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the community discerns God's call for their discipleship. The gathering of the church in Acts 6 or Acts 15 offers a model for discernment that shapes Baptist practice. Yet each local church is not independent from the rest of the Body of Christ and separate from others. As a community that stands directly under the rule of Christ it is competent to read Scripture as an interpretive community and decide how it should best follow the call of Christ. A wise church will seek advice from others beyond the local community as it discerns the mind of Christ for its own life. One of the roles of a minister is to bring something of the broader Christian tradition and theological insight into the discussions of the local church, but it remains both competent and responsible for the decisions it makes.

4. The One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church

While Baptist ecclesiology has insisted that each local church is wholly the church, it is not the whole church. The local church is a manifestation of the universal church and Baptists have always seen themselves as part of the one catholic (that is, universal) church. Although we have embraced the language of being Separatist and Dissenters, it is important to recognise what our dissent is from. We have not wanted to dissent from being part of the universal church, but from particular ways in which this was expressed in the established church and in the relationship this established church had with the state.

Although the language of independence has often been used, it is misleading, suggesting it is possible to function without others. 'Independence' feels too much like the hand saying to

²⁸ In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul interweaves discussion of difficult and contested pastoral issues with the insistence that all those are those for whom Christ has died, and that they have all been bought at a price.

the eye, 'I do not need you'.²⁹ A local church sits directly under the rule of Christ and so is competent to act in this capacity, but each local church is always part of the whole Body of Christ. While in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul uses the body metaphor for the local church, the numerous references to the church as a 'body' in Ephesians seem to have in view the wider church beyond just the local congregation.³⁰ In particular, Paul stresses in Ephesians 4 that there is one body, alongside his declaration that there is 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all'.³¹ This is the universal church: all those 'in Christ' in all times and places. Baptists, sometimes in the face of those who wish to exclude them, have insisted that they are part of this one universal church. It is much better to describe local churches as competent to act but always inter-dependent.

This inter-dependence will be expressed first in the life of Baptist Associations and the Baptist Union. While a wider Union only developed in the 19th century, there was an early impetus for local Baptist churches to meet and work together in Association life. While competent to make decisions about their own worship and mission, local churches in Association and Union have chosen to act collectively and inter-dependently in some matters. Contributing to a national or regional fund to pay trans-local ministers (whether Regional Ministers or those who serve the whole Union) is a clear example. More controversially has been recent discussion around the rules for Accredited Ministry. A nationally recognised list of ministers was first introduced in the early 20th century alongside what was then called the 'Sustentation Fund' and which became the Home Mission Fund. While a local church is competent to call to the ministry of that church those whom it discerns before God, the churches have made the contingent decision to give responsibility for the accredited list to a particular group to operate it on their behalf. This may create some tensions between what is discerned locally and nationally, but having such a list is an important expression of our inter-dependence.

This inter-dependence will also be expressed in ecumenical relationships, where we express our unity in Christ and in his one body. While early Baptists understood that they themselves were part of the universal church, the question, with which all churches grappled, was who else belonged to this universal church. Establishing the boundaries of the church, and who then lies outside these boundaries, has always been controversial, and as those persecuted and de-churched by others, this was an important issue for early Baptists. From the 20th century, in particular, there has been a much greater opportunity for the tangible expression of belonging to one body in ecumenical relationships. There are likely still to be differences amongst us on exactly where the boundaries of the universal church might lie. The Baptist Union Assembly voted decisively but not unanimously in 1989 (and again in 1995) to be part of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. But, taking seriously Paul's metaphor of the body regarding the universal as well as the local church, we should care deeply about those others

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:21.

³⁰ See Ephesians 1:23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30

³¹ Ephesians 4:5-6.

in the Body of Christ and be committed to supporting their well-being and flourishing. While there still may be some disagreement on the exact boundaries for ecumenical relationships, there is a shared commitment to living with others in the Body of Christ.

5. The Calling to Ministry

Over the centuries of Baptist history there have been different approaches to ministry, shaped by various ecclesial and cultural trends. Today the differences in the theology and practice of ministry exist along a spectrum, and one way of categorising this spectrum is from a much more functional view of ministry, which sees ministry more as a set of tasks that this person happens to do, to a more sacramental view of ministry, which understands ministry as something I am called to be rather than called to do. Alongside this are the influences from the house church movement with its strong sense of Apostolic ministry and leadership and from Global South churches with a stronger view of ministerial authority.³² We will have different emphases and understandings, both within the group writing this and beyond, but we believe that there might be shared theological convictions around which we can gather, set out below.

Ministers are one of the gifts of God for the Church. In Ephesians 4 Paul sets his list of particular offices or roles in the wider context of a God who gives gifts to the church. There are complications in holding together the diverse models of ministry across all New Testament texts, and different views continue about how the various titles and offices could and should be held together, but underlying all is the conviction that ministry is a gift from God. There are, of course, other gifts of God, but we understand the calling to ordained ministry to be a specific gift in line with the New Testament pattern. There are those called to other church roles, and more recently the development of Recognised Local Ministers. All are called to share in ministry and some are called to be ordained ministers who have a particular role among us.

Ministry begins with the church and not the individual. The 1948 document *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* summarises its understanding of ministry as governed by this principle, that 'it is a ministry of the church and not a ministry of an individual. It is the church which preaches the Word and celebrates the sacraments, and it is the church which, through pastoral oversight, feeds the flock and ministers to the world.'³³ The minister, where there is one, normally takes oversight for these aspects of ministry but they remain the work of the church, which itself is a 'royal priesthood and holy nation'.³⁴ This will look different in different contexts and will be shaped by the particular local theologies of congregations, and the way that authority will be balanced between congregations and ministers will vary. For Pioneers and Chaplains, the local church may seem much more distant in their everyday ministry. But

³² Global South churches refer to African, Caribbean, Asian and Latin American Christianity.

³³ Baptist Union Council, 'The Baptist Doctrine of the Church', *Baptist Quarterly* 12.12 (1948), p. 444.

³⁴ 1 Peter 2:9.

what has been important for Baptists in developing their understanding of ministry is that no-one can make themselves a minister, whether in a pioneer, chaplaincy or local church context, but ministers are gifts of God as discerned by the church.

As such, ministers on the accredited list should be seen as ministers of the whole Union sharing in the oversight of the whole, and as ministers in the universal church, and not simply ministers of the local church. They are gifts of God for the whole Church and not just one local congregation. This is contested among Baptists and there has been significant discussion in the past about whether ministers should be seen as only those who have pastoral oversight in a congregation or whether those who act as chaplains, pioneers or in trans-local roles should still be described as ministers. Recognising this contested history, our conviction in the present is that all those on the accredited list should be seen equally as ministers, whether in local church ministry or in other roles, and that all share in the oversight of the Union. Those whose ministry is beyond the local church are recognised as part of our inter-dependence. This suggests that the accredited list is more than just a pragmatic approach that offers some quality control to churches, but a way of expressing ministry as the gift of God for the church as it shares in God's mission to the world. Who is included on the accredited list is then a significant responsibility.

Ministers are for the well-being of the church. They are called to offer spiritual oversight to enable the discipleship of the people of God. Baptists have generally taken the position that ministers are not *necessary* for the church to exist but are given for its well-being. More recently, shaped partly by the increasing organisational complexities of churches and their legal status as charities, a common shorthand has been that ministers 'run a church'. We want to suggest that this is a very 'thin' description of ministry and there is a much richer theological understanding of ministry as a gift from God to offer oversight to enable the discipleship of the people of God, and that this should be the theological foundation for our understanding of ministry.

The importance of ministers offering oversight is held in tension with the responsibility of the whole church, the priesthood of all believers. This is helpfully expressed in the language of 'inclusive representation'.³⁵ Ministers have a representative role, representing the universal church to the local and the local church to the community, but do so in a way that is not exclusive, as others can fill these roles, but includes the whole church in their ministry. There is nothing that only ministers can do, but some things that ministers appropriately do, for they do so in an inclusive representative way. It matters when ministers preside at communion, for example, or offer pastoral care, not because what they do is necessarily better than others, but because through their calling recognised by the church, they represent the church.

³⁵ This phrase was coined by Nigel Wright.

Ministry is a gift from God, but it also requires preparation and ongoing attention³⁶. While there have been, and still are, differences of opinion about the importance and benefit of study as a requirement for accredited ministry, it is our conviction that the current requirement of a period of initial ministerial formation and the more recent development of on-going formation in Continuing Ministerial Development are both essential. They are part of the call to discipleship to which we respond in baptism as we all seek to grow up to the measure of the full stature of Christ³⁷ and take the call of God seriously and our response to it. Ministry may be seen as a specialised form of discipleship and discipleship requires our sustained attention.³⁸ While the language of education and training have both been used previously to describe the preparation of ministers, generally now the language of ministerial formation is adopted. This includes learning and developing skills but is bound up more broadly with the development of character and ongoing growth in spirituality. This emphasis on the people ministers are becoming fits this strong emphasis on discipleship.

6. The Life of Worship

The worship of the church is always a response to the gracious invitation of God; our words in worship are always ‘a second word’ to the prior Word that God has spoken in Christ. Patterns of worship have changed and will continue to change, being appropriately contextual and diverse. To reflect on the place of worship in Baptist identity is not to prescribe a particular liturgical form – in the way our earliest ancestors insisted on everything being extempore – but to explore how we live out the foundational confession that Jesus is Lord collectively in the local church. One key stress of a Baptist understanding of worship has been that it begins inwardly and then flows outwardly. Words are important, but just saying words is never enough, because worship flows from the heart that has encountered and been changed by God.

All Baptist occasions of worship will then be ‘services of the Word’. If our worship is ‘a second word’ in response to the first Word spoken by God in Christ, then Scripture will be central to all that we do. We gather to hear again God speak and to respond in worship and service. We note a concerning tendency in our Baptist churches to read significantly less Scripture than was read in the past, and is read by some of our ecumenical partners, and we should hear this as a challenge; that if our desire is to respond to the Word then Scripture needs to be more than an introduction to a sermon. Baptists have long advocated for the importance of preaching as the written Word is opened, and should continue to do so, but this should not be to the detriment of reading Scripture itself.

³⁶ 1 Timothy 4:6-8.

³⁷ Ephesians 4:13.

³⁸ See Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Marks of Ministry*, <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=244139>

Baptists have debated whether the language of sacrament or ordinance is more appropriate to describe the two significant moments in worship of baptism and communion. We think that sharing the language used more commonly in the universal church of these moments as sacraments is appropriate, for they are ‘means of grace’. They do not simply look back to the great acts of God in Christ in the past but are moments of invitation and encounter with God through the Holy Spirit in the present. When we pray for a baptismal candidate in the water or for the congregation around the table, we expect God to hear and answer our prayers. Both ‘acted creeds’, dynamic moments that express both the belief of the individual and the wider faith of the church, for it is the church that baptises and shares bread and wine, working through the individuals in the pool or presiding at the table.

Central to Baptist identity historically has been the theological insistence that a biblical understanding of baptism requires personal repentance and faith, and thus a reluctance to accept the theological validity of infant baptism.³⁹ While this resulted in closed membership for most churches, open membership is now much more common. The theological and pastoral challenge today is whether those who have been baptised as infants should be baptised as believers.⁴⁰ One response, sometimes with a reluctance to discuss the possible validity of infant baptism, has been to stress profession of faith as the basis of membership and to have the kind of open membership such that it is possible to become a member of a Baptist church without any kind of baptism. We think that baptism ought to be expected of all those who respond to the call of Christ. Normatively this would be near the beginning of a journey of faith, reflecting the sense of initiation which is fundamental to baptism, but there are always exceptions. We need to be ecumenically generous, and there will be differences in the way that churches might express this generosity, but still insist on the importance of baptism. If baptism is an ‘acted creed’, then for Baptists baptism is a significant moment of unity. Here we share in the proclamation that Jesus is Saviour and Lord and commit ourselves to a life of discipleship under that Lordship. Baptism then is a moment of deep significance and significant unity.

The practice of communion in our local churches is diverse, reflecting something of the diversity of approaches to worship; such diversity appears in the frequency of celebration, the style of approach and who is welcomed at the table. As something that is clearly commanded by Jesus in Scripture,⁴¹ and as such a divinely instituted occasion for encounter with God, it can only be appropriate that communion is celebrated with real care, not as an appendix to a service that has focused on other things. Our sense is that this is an area that needs our attention so that communion can be all that it can be as God’s invitation and our response.

³⁹ Acts 2:38 clearly links repentance with baptism.

⁴⁰ See Archbishops Council and Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Pushing at Boundaries of Unity* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), pp. 73-4, for a discussion and a request from Church of England not to baptise as believers those baptised as infants.

⁴¹ Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

Historically a significant debate among Baptists which caused real division was whether the table should be open to all believers or only to those baptised on profession of faith. The discussion over an open table now is around the boundaries of that openness, and whether children, who are still on the way towards baptism, are welcome, or those with no faith at all but who find the table to be, in John Wesley's words, 'a converting ordinance'. While recognising the diversity of approach among our churches, we also assert that here is another 'acted creed' through which we confess our faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and doing this together makes this an important moment of unity in our shared faith.

7. The Church and the State

If Jesus is Lord, as witnessed in Scripture and confessed in baptism and communion then this requires Baptists to eschew other forms of lordship, in particular that which might be exercised by the state. Baptists have historically insisted on the importance of freedom, which is rooted in the freedom to serve Christ as Lord and to do so even if this conflicts with the demands of the state, for we are obedient to God and not human institutions.⁴² From this basis Baptists have then wanted to argue for religious freedom more generally. The language of being 'aliens and exiles'⁴³ points to a particular kind of relationship that the church has with wider society. Yet we do exist in relationship to the state, most significantly in the current context through charity law. Churches have generally been willing to be treated as charities for the financial advantages of Gift Aid, but with this comes the need to live within the requirements of the state, which, for example, determines who cannot be a charity trustee, and so would be disqualified from being an accredited minister or trustee in a local church. The Church has always had to navigate its way within broader structures and negotiate its position in each age and context ; however it is interpreted, this seems to be what Paul is doing in Romans 13.

But such a concept of freedom cannot be the basis for withdrawal from the public square but rather for engagement with it. We recognise that how the church might decide best to engage in the public square, either collectively as a community or by its members individually, will be varied. Jesus uses the metaphors of both salt and light to reflect how the church would engage with the earth and the world.⁴⁴ These are positive metaphors that speak of what the church has to offer, akin to Peter's encouragement to 'conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles',⁴⁵ which needs to be offered with humility and gentleness. This will involve a prophetic aspect as the people of God stand in the line of the Old Testament prophets, and may involve moments of challenge as the church seeks to speak truth to power.⁴⁶ Again, we may disagree on the most appropriate ways that this should be done and disagree about those

⁴² See, for example, Acts 5:29.

⁴³ 1 Peter 2:11.

⁴⁴ Matthew 5:13-14.

⁴⁵ 1 Peter 2:12.

⁴⁶ Amos 5:1-7.

aspects in wider society to which the church may offer both salt and light, but we share in a commitment to both the church's freedom and its positive engagement with society.

8. The Mission of God

To declare that Jesus is Lord, as we have throughout this document, is to insist that this is much more than an individual and personal confession. We began with Paul's insistence in 1 Corinthians 8 that there is one God and one Lord and that this has global and cosmic significance: Jesus is Lord of all. Those who confess the name of Jesus will be drawn into the life of God, to work with God, until that point when 'every knee will bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.'⁴⁷ There are a number of places in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles where Jesus gives commissions to his disciples,⁴⁸ which emphasise different aspects of the work of the church. These come together in an understanding of mission as the ongoing work of God in the world, a God whose very nature is revealed in the sending of the Son and the Spirit, into which we are invited and called to participate. This understanding has generally been described with the term *missio Dei*.

The Church is thus always outward looking and always focused on the future. The life of the local church, its ministry and its worship, is never for its own benefit and is always focused on God's work in the world in the Spirit, for through Jesus 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.'⁴⁹ Jesus Christ, as Lord, is good news for all people. We acknowledge that engaging in God's mission in the past has not always been done well as the church has imposed culture rather than valued and listened to those to whom they were sent. We have learned and are still learning. We will disagree over what we think is the most appropriate way to respond to God's invitation to join in the divine mission, we will work towards different priorities within our local churches, for example in evangelism, social engagement, pursuing justice and offering a prophetic witness, and we may struggle with what others deem to be more important. But we believe that what we say and what we do, our proclamation and action, must be held together, as we see reflected in the Gospels, and cannot be pulled apart. We share in the conviction that this is ultimately God's work in which we are privileged to share, and we do not have ownership of it; we share in the commitment to work with God for the day that every knee bows, every tongue confesses and all things are reconciled.

We share too, as those who confess Jesus as Lord, the conviction that key virtues should always be central to the church's engagement in the mission of God. The Church is called to humility, acknowledging the grace we have received and the grace we continue to need; the church is called to love and to reflect in all its words and actions the fundamental nature of

⁴⁷ Philippians 2:10-11.

⁴⁸ For example, Matthew 28:19-20, Luke 24:44-9, John 20:19-23, Acts 1:7-8 are the post-resurrection commission as well those instructions given to his disciples before the crucifixion.

⁴⁹ Colossians 1:20.

God revealed in Christ; the church is called to justice so that the actions of the church reflect the good news that it is sharing with others.

We confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We acknowledge the Lordship of Christ over the church, believing that each local church must be free and able to live in the light of the Lordship of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. And we proclaim the Lordship of Christ to the world. To confess Jesus as Lord is both to declare our commitment to each other, as well as God, and to look for the day when the whole creation acknowledges that Lordship.

Some reflections on the process of writing the document

Baptists, throughout their history, have found various ways of expressing their self-understanding of what it means to be disciples of Jesus. At times, this has involved crafting confessions of faith, affirming creeds and writing other theological documents. For Baptists who are part of the Baptist Union of Great Britain the *Declaration of Principle* has been a key document over the past century. But more than that, Baptists have always wanted to go back to Scripture to shape their understanding of faith and church. Baptist identity and theology have never been a static and unmoveable set of beliefs and Baptists have been committed to keep returning to Scripture because this is where God speaks. So now, once more, those involved in writing this document sought to return to Scripture in order to re-articulate ongoing truths in a changing context.

This document has been written by a group of Baptist ministers who represent a broad theological spectrum of life in *Baptists Together*, but are committed to following Jesus together as Baptist Christians. This diversity yet deeply shared faith has been an important aspect of our work together. One important example of both this diversity and commonality concerns how we read the Bible. As a group we share a deep commitment to the importance and authority of the Bible, expressed earlier in the document, but disagree sometimes about how the Bible should be interpreted and applied. Hermeneutics, the term given to how texts are read and understood, has always been an important issue for Christians. Important because the Bible is so central, but also important because the Bible has been interpreted differently. We recognise that, as in our own conversations as a group, among *Baptists Together* we live and serve alongside those who read the same Bible but who read it differently. We have appreciated generous yet committed conversations together as a group about the Bible and how we understand it. We recognise there is much more work to do together on understanding the different ways we read the Bible and encourage those generous conversations to happen in whatever ways are possible.

The group met five times: first to explore a whole range of related issues with papers written by members of the group; second to build on this by sketching out the content for this paper; and in the last three meetings to look at drafts of the text which were reworked collectively. At the same time the Baptist Union trustees discussed the need for ongoing thinking about our Baptist identity to happen and encouraged the group to continue their work. We offer it to our sisters and brothers in *Baptists Together* with the prayer that it strengthens our shared life and mission.

Beth Allison-Glenny

Anthony Clarke

Steve Finamore

Andy Goodliff

Julian Gotobed

Jeff Jacobson
Philip Lutterodt
Sally Nelson
Gale Richards
Diane Watts
Simon Woodman

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