

the baptist ministers'
journal



January 2022 volume 353

Interview: Nonconformity
Ian Stackhouse

Baptists and Same-Sex Relationships
Andy Goodliff

The Real Birthday of Jesus
John Dyer

1644 London Confession
Michael Jackson

There is Hope
Paul Beasley-Murray

Reviews

Of Interest To You

contacts for the baptist ministers' journal

Editor: Sally Nelson, 4 Station View, Church Fenton, Tadcaster LS24 9QY;
revsal96@aol.com

Book reviews: Michael Peat, The Multifaith Chaplaincy Centre,
The Grange, 1 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TB; mike.peat@bristol.ac.uk

Of Interest To You: Arderne Gillies, 17 Leeks Close, Southwell, Notts NG25 0BA;
rev.arderne@btinternet.com

Paper Journal distribution: Rev Adrian Ward, 19 Forrest Close,
South Woodham Ferrars, Chelmsford, Essex CM3 5NR;
revadrianward@gmail.com

Electronic Journal distribution: Ron Day, 14 Gretton Street, Oakham,
Rutland LE15 7UU; ronald.e.day@outlook.com

the baptist ministers'
journal

January 2022, vol 353, ISSN 0968-2406

<i>The bmj Interview: Ian Stackhouse on Nonconformity</i>	5
<i>Baptists and Same-Sex Relationships: A Brief History (Andy Goodliff)</i>	9
<i>The Real Birthday of Jesus (John Dyer)</i>	20
<i>The Biblical World of Baptists Reflected in the 1644 London Confession (Michael Jackson)</i>	26
<i>There is Hope: Preaching at Funerals—an Introduction (Paul Beasley-Murray)</i>	32
<i>Reviews</i>	35
<i>Of Interest To You</i>	41

The baptist ministers' journal is the journal of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.
Useful contact details are listed inside the front and back covers.

(all service to the Fellowship is honorary)

www.bmf-uk.org

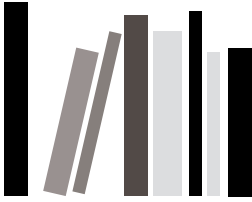
The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the editor or the editorial board.

Copyright of individual articles normally rests with the author(s).

Any request to reproduce an article will be referred to the author(s).

We expect *bmj* to be acknowledged when an article is reproduced.

*bmj's design and layout is provided by Micky Munroe
Printed by Keenan Print (keenanprint@btconnect.com)*



from the editor

Year of Dissent?

Welcome to a new year, and to a long-overdue redesign of the *bmj*! The BMF Committee is indebted to Micky Munroe, who has drawn on his pre-ministry professional skills as a graphic designer to make this happen. Thank you, Micky! I hope all our readers will appreciate the new look.

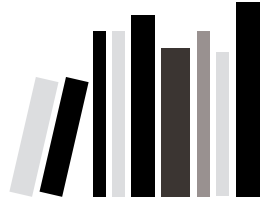
The start of 2022 may well be remembered as the second new year of the coronavirus pandemic, but of course other significant events have still taken place. One was the death (on 26 December 2021) of South Africa's Desmond Tutu, and his New Year's Day funeral service in Cape Town. World leaders past and present have been paying tribute over the past few days, and something that has emerged over and over in their eulogies is Tutu's prophetic edge. He would always speak out for the oppressed, wherever they might be.

Tutu's prophetic spirit was, however, tempered with compassion. I was asked by another journal some years back to review his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, published in the late 1990s as a record of the Truth and Reconciliation process (of which Tutu was chair). I was impressed at that time, and remain so, with the generous and Christlike openness of this process: to facilitate the confession of wrongs and their forgiveness, and to put the past in the past so that the future is truly free.

Dissent can take many forms: Tutu showed us one, and Baptist principles show us another. Both are prophetic since they attempt to bring the eternal light of God's word into contemporary darkness. In this issue of *bmj* there are several articles with this baptistic dissenting and prophetic edge: I have been challenged by them all and commend them to you, with thanks to the courageous writers. It is always costly to be a prophet, but if we take the name of 'Baptist', we are called to be so.

May 2022 be for each of us a Year of Dissent, against the powers of darkness and oppression that we meet. **SN**

the *bmj* interview



Ian Stackhouse on Nonconformity

Ed: Ian, tell us what you are doing at the moment in ministry?

IS: Much the same as I have been doing for the past 30 years: preaching the gospel, pastoring a church, reading and writing whenever I can, plus making a contribution to the wider church, be it seminaries, conferences, retreats, both here and overseas. It is a full life, and one that is immensely stimulating. I feel very grateful to have all these opportunities.

Ed: Recently you wrote a book entitled *In Praise of Dissent: Nonconformity in a Time of Covid*. What exactly prompted you to write it?

IS: I had been mulling over some thoughts (brewing is possibly a better word), ever since the beginning of lockdown, but given the sensitivities around the issue in my congregation and the inappropriateness of imposing my views in the pulpit, I decided the best thing I could do, for my own sanity as much as anything, was to write.

Writing has always been a bit of catharsis for me. In much the same way as C.S. Lewis said of prayer, I only write when I am in crisis; but since I am in crisis a lot, I tend to write a lot. The decision to publish, however, albeit as an e-book,

was motivated (I admit) by sheer bloody-mindedness. I was so horrified by the lack of debate that I decided that even if half of what I wrote was wrong, the very act of putting something out there was important. I don't care if it gets mauled to bits. What I care about is lively debate, and I've not seen a great deal of that in the past couple of years. The government narrative has been stifling of anything that smacks of dissent, which is very concerning—not least because it has meant that so many unsubstantiated arguments have gone unchallenged.

Ed: How and when did you begin to explore politics and nonconformity? Has this been a feature of your earlier books?

IS: My focus over the years has been more ecclesiological or spiritual, by which I mean matters of personal spirituality. But since my ecclesiology has always been defined by a strong sense of the church as 'the polis' (the ultimate political community), and since spirituality for me has never been about soft piety, then I guess I was always going to end up in a standoff with the concept of big government. Add to that a long-standing antipathy that I have towards what we used to call political correctness, then this was an accident waiting to happen.

Strangely enough, I don't see this recent foray into politics as much different to what I've been doing all my life. My dismay about lockdown is as much a pastoral response as it is an ideological one. What is different, I guess, is the responsibility I feel for my country. Lockdown made me realise not only that I am a dissenter but also that I am a patriot. How those two notions fit together I don't quite know, other than I have always been a devotee of Bonhoeffer, and he most definitely was both. He loved his country and couldn't bear to see it go to the dogs. I feel the same, not in a nostalgic sense, may I add—I'm not a 'little Englander'—but in the sense that the loss of freedoms, such as we have seen over the last couple of years, is a violation, in my estimation, of our cultural heritage.

Likewise with woke. I can understand why it has emerged and much of the woke agenda resonates with Christian sensibilities about the disenfranchised. But the overall tenor of woke is profoundly illiberal, and against some of the deepest instincts of our political culture (including multiculturalism, strangely enough, of which I am a great fan). I have heard some describe woke as a form of cultural Marxism, and I must confess that I am inclined to agree. Its intolerance of anything that does not agree with its agenda is worrying, to put it mildly. It feels like an ideology of ungrace.

Ed: In *In Praise of Dissent*, you suggest that the government's move to lockdown, masks and social distancing is 'soft totalitarianism', and you wonder whether Christians should disobey the law because it restricts Kingdom work. Why do you think the impacts of the Covid lockdown are so serious as a principle?

IS: It's serious: first, because it is unprecedented—at least here in the West; second, because so many of the measures, masks in particular, are based on flimsy evidence, but have taken on the status of virtue; and third, because if we don't speak up now, we will soon lose the freedom to speak at all. It might be worth stating at this point that my first discipline is history and politics. Which is not a pretext, therefore, to draw crass analogies with the past, but is to say that I'm hardwired to things like propaganda and the way in which totalitarianism, by definition, creeps up on a society rather than just announces itself. I think we are seeing signs of this happening, and what is most disturbing of all, as Laura Dodsworth points out in *A State of Fear*, is the deliberate use of fearmongering on the part of the UK government for the sake of achieving compliance. It is chilling and I see the impact of this wherever I go. If that's not serious, I don't know what is. Once you unleash fear on a population, it is very difficult to come back from it.

Likewise, once a government assumes emergency powers, history tells us that they are very reluctant to hand them back. As someone once said, there is nothing more permanent than temporary measures. We shall wait to see what happens, but I am not overly optimistic that things will 'return to normal.' Indeed, things may well get worse, in which case, we might need to revisit some biblical texts to discern where the line lies between compliance to the law and disobedience on the grounds of conscience. As Baptists, this ought not to be unfamiliar territory for us.

Ed: In WW2 the country accepted curfews and rationing; in the time of the plague, the Derbyshire village of Eyam locked itself down to prevent infection. What would you say about such 'greater good' arguments which restrict the normal activities of individuals?

IS: I'm all for it. I also agree that there is nothing heroic about flouting laws in a time of plague, if by flouting them you put other people at risk. So, the real question is whether the measures around Covid are proportionate, and I'm afraid I just don't think they are. Indeed, when the cure is more damaging than the sickness, which is what we will start to realise over the next decade, then you really ought to ask questions. That's what the scientists who signed the Great Barrington Declaration were trying to do. They were trying to alert the governments of our world to the enormous 'collateral damage' that has been inflicted by lockdowns (India being perhaps the most vivid example). But the fact that most of your readers probably haven't even heard of the Great Barrington Declaration is concerning.

Ed: Is Covid really the issue? Or did Covid simply reveal underlying national problems?

IS: That's a good question. My own view is that Covid, in particular the compliance to the lockdown protocols, is the logical endgame of trends that have been forming throughout my adult life: namely, risk aversion (the precautionary principle), the power of the media, regulatory intrusion, not to mention the loss of realism concerning death. I'm not a Covid denier. Far from it. The virus is real

enough and I have first-hand experience of its impact. But when the average age of those dying of Covid is beyond the normal life expectancy, it ought to at least raise the question of how best to manage the virus without crashing the economy. When you say this, you get criticised for not caring. But given that economies are key to flourishing societies, it's not a case of life versus the economy—that is a false dichotomy in my opinion—but of life versus life. My father was in business all his working life. He ran a small steel company in Southall. Almost certainly he would not have survived lockdown. And as for my wife, who suffered breast cancer a few years ago, I have no idea how she would have fared had it occurred last year. In the final count, I suspect there will be more deaths as a result of lockdown than ever there were as a result of Covid. But they will be hidden statistics, and not ones that governments will have to give an account for.

Ed: The denial of death is a major feature of modern life and I would agree that Covid unveiled that problem, with which churches have colluded by not fully embracing a belief in resurrection. Would it have been better to focus on that in your book, rather than the issue of ecclesial autonomy?

IS: That's a good point, but I am not sure that would have done justice to my concerns. The denial of death is a cultural phenomenon, to be sure, and it seems that Christians are not a lot different in the way they avoid the subject. As a pastor and a preacher, I find that troubling. But simply focusing on this aspect of our faith, without attending to the wider political

issues, would have felt a bit too pietistic for my liking. After all, the resurrection is not simply about my personal destiny but also, in the words of Oliver O'Donovan, about the reaffirmation and reordering of creation. In other words, it is a political statement and one that has implications for the moral order of society. Simply to focus on personal spirituality (which is important of course), or even local outreach (which has been impressive, I do agree), avoids this dimension of our faith, in my opinion, and is guilty of the spiritual/secular frameworks which have so dogged our witness. Yes, I am keen on ecclesial autonomy; but more important for me is the prophetic witness of the church in the public square. I think that is what I was trying to say in the book.

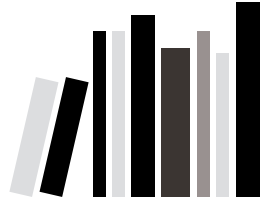
Ed: I have argued elsewhere that dissenters are, by definition, on the edge and not in the majority, but that Baptists don't actually like that marginal ecclesiological place much in practice, and so we are tempted to be 'mainstream' rather than to identify with our principles. Do you agree—and does it affect our Covid compliance, in your opinion?

IS: I do agree, but it would sadden me to think that my book is guilty of this. As a matter of fact, I am very happy to be on the margins. I had a chance to go Anglican once, but the reason I didn't pursue it was because I didn't want to be identified with the establishment (any more than the establishment would want to identify with me). Indeed, the past couple of years have convinced me that I really am a dissenter, and I would like to think my anger over what has happened is not because of feelings of powerlessness (or affront

because we haven't been consulted by the powers that be), but rather for want of a prophetic voice. When, as secular historian Tom Holland argues, the church has been reduced to a branch of the National Health Service (and Baptists it seems to me have been just as compliant as the Anglicans in this respect), then you really have to ask some searching questions about how distinctive we really are. I am not interested in restoring some lost Christendom. The quicker we give up on that project the better. What I am interested in is the church being a voice in the wilderness. But my feeling, rightly or wrongly, is that we are more mainstream than we care to admit. Covid, in my opinion, has brought that out into the open. Had we been on the edge, I think we would have said more. The fact that we have been compliant, and in some instances gold-plated government regulations, is proof that we have joined the mainstream and lost our prophetic voice. By prophetic, I don't mean reckless. I see no virtue in that and have certainly not exposed our congregation to unnecessary risk. What I mean by prophetic is having the courage to ask the awkward questions that no one else is asking—the boldness to be able to speak truth to power.

Ed: Thank you so much, Ian, for sharing your thoughts with us and provoking a discussion on dissent. For readers: Rev Dr Ian Stackhouse's book is called *In Praise of Dissent: Nonconformity in a Time of Covid*, and is published by Amazon at £7.99. It is reviewed in this issue of *bmj*.

articles



Baptists and Same-Sex Relationships: A Brief History

by Andy Goodliff

Author: Andy Goodliff is the minister of Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend-on-Sea.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there was an expression of views by Baptists, generally in the letter pages of the *Baptist Times*, on the subject of homosexuality.¹ Occasionally it was debated and addressed by the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. This short paper wants to track some of that discussion and how the Baptist Union sought to hold conversations in ways that both made space and avoided public fallout.

At the March 1987 Baptist Union Council a working group was set up to issue a statement on Aids and provide guidelines for Christian education on sexuality.² Even though the discussion demonstrated there was a range of opinion, the Council voted overwhelmingly for an interim statement that asserted homosexual relations to be outside the will of God. The working group presented their report *Aids: A Christian Perspective* in the November of the same year. The report stated that Aids was not God's judgement, while at the same time arguing for chastity outside of marriage as a 'radical and effective way of combating the spread of Aids'. The report argued that we all fall short of perfection

and we should 'be on our guard against isolating sexual transgression from failure to live up to all the other ideals set before us by the life of Jesus'. The report suggested that the Christian response to Aids should be one of compassionate ministry and one way forward was to work with the URC in offering a specialist Aids help service. The report argued for a view of homosexuality that distinguished between orientation and behaviour and that homosexual genital acts are contrary to the will of God and the natural order of creation. This view was shared by all in the working group apart from one person. The report adds that there 'have been countless instances through history of the value of the bonds of affection and fidelity which characterise homosexual relationships, but they were different from heterosexual relationships' because 'they lack the complementarity inherent in the relationship between the sexes.'³

In 1988 the infamous guideline was introduced by the Ministry Main Committee to assist the Ministerial Recognition Committee, which had recommended it.

The new guideline was as follows:

*Homosexual orientation (whether male or female) is not itself a reason for exclusion from ministry, but homosexual genital practice is to be regarded as unacceptable. Ministers are expected not to advocate homosexual or lesbian genital relationships as acceptable alternatives to male/female partnership in marriage.*⁴

Guidelines relating to serious sexual misconduct had been introduced in 1981 and these were now supplemented by this new guideline related to homosexuality. What is not clear is why the MR Committee made the recommendation, but what might be inferred is that a particular case had arisen to which it felt there was a need for clear guidance. The Council minutes indicate there was a discussion but there is no record of what was said.⁵ The guidelines were sent to all ministers, but were not published anywhere and there was no report in the *Baptist Times* relating to it. (This guideline remained in place until 2014, at which point the second sentence was removed.) In the context of the 1980s this position and the introduction of this guideline is not surprising. All other major denominations would have held the same position. Biblical and theological engagement with homosexuality was minimal at this point.⁶

A debate within the letter pages of the *Baptist Times* appeared several times in the mid-1990s. This debate was rarely edifying!⁷ The first round was in 1995, coming in response to the Church of England's *Something to Celebrate* report,⁸ and then at the end of 1996

into 1997 there was a second exchange, originating this time from responses to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement's 20th anniversary celebration at Southwark Cathedral in November 1996.⁹ In 1996 Keith Riglin, a Baptist minister,¹⁰ wrote an article for the *Baptist Ministers' Journal* offering a Christian view on homosexuality.¹¹ It was an affirming view which argued that the case against being affirming was not an 'iron clad case for condemnation.' Riglin saw it as 'unfortunate' that Baptists seemed unwilling to hold a debate like the URC and the Methodists on the restrictions placed on Baptist ministers by the MR rules and argued for the liberty of those who were affirming. A response by Robin Giles to the Riglin article appeared in the next edition,¹² contending that Riglin's argument was flawed with regards to the statistics. It made no attempt to engage Riglin's biblical case. I highlight this exchange because these are the only two articles on homosexuality in the *bmj's* history until another exchange appeared in the July 2014 edition.¹³ Baptists have been reticent to discuss this issue in print.¹⁴

In 1997 the debate continued in response to the URC decision to open the door to practising homosexuals as ministers and at the same time the Church of England synod agreed that the Bishops' report *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991) be commended for discussion in dioceses and parishes. At this time David Coffey saw that the debate going on in other denominations might compel Baptists to have a similar debate. He said 'we recognise the responsibility the Union has to offer guidance at a time when this

is a very important topic for the Christian Church.' ¹⁵ In the background to this was an attempt to issue a public resolution at the Baptist Assembly in April 1997 that would give a clear non-affirming stance. This had been an amendment to a public resolution written by the Regent's Park College Preaching Society and agreed by Council to 'offering care to those with HIV/AIDs and to raising awareness.' ¹⁶ This amendment was withdrawn, but between 1998 and 2001, the same minister each year put forward a proposed public resolution.

The response of the Union was to set up in 1998 a Human Sexuality Working Group chaired by Brian Haymes. The group presented their report called *Making Moral Choices* to Council in March 2000. This was study material on sex and God, singleness, marriage, cohabitation, divorce and homosexuality. In the introduction they stated it was not a 'theological treatise or a sociological report' and 'neither does it present an official Baptist Union of Great Britain policy on human sexuality.' ¹⁷ It was designed to help churches have conversations about the issues. The report began with an opening chapter on how we make moral choices and emphasises the Baptist distinctives found in the first clause of the Declaration of Principle. It claimed that this was a good place to begin because it set out fundamental Baptist convictions, namely: the sole and absolute authority of Jesus Christ, the importance of the Bible, the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the important of the Church acting together. Alongside this it also argued that it is important for Baptists to listen to other Christians, both from the past

and the present and to those 'who have an insider's feel for the moral problem we face.' ¹⁸ In the Council discussion that followed the report's presentation there was once again a range of views presented, but one contributor said 'that affirmation lay with the local church which must be helped to a conclusion directed by the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁹

The Council made two changes to the report. The first was to delete one sentence which said 'In its history the Church has varied in its acceptance of homosexual people and practice, but has in the main condemned homosexual practice as sinful.' ²⁰ This was felt not to be a strong and clear enough statement of the traditional teaching of the church and it was replaced with: 'The traditional understanding of the Church is that same-sex acts fall outside the boundaries of acceptable practice. Sadly, this teaching has not always been accompanied by pastoral sensitivity.' ²¹ The second change was to include the section in the Ministerial Rules that related to human sexuality and conduct unbecoming as a statement of the Baptist Union's position. The report was launched at the Baptist Assembly. David Coffey would report in March 2001 that it did not sell well and feedback from the seminar where it was launched had been invited, but not received. ²²

In 2000 the Network for Baptists Affirming Lesbian and Gay Christians was launched. It was a group of about 20. The drive had been a letter to the *Baptist Times* in March 1998 from a young Baptist who had 'come out' to a friend in church and found rejection and isolation. ²³ Hugh Cross and David Trafford wrote an open

letter inviting others who were willing to minister to lesbian and gay people to contact them and two years later the Network was started.²⁴

In 2001 there was still a push by one Baptist minister for a public resolution on homosexuality. It had been declined each year. At the 2001 Baptist Assembly there was an open debate led by Elaine Storkey, one of the speakers that year.²⁵ As part of that debate, Martin Stears, a member of Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, Hitchin, shared his story of coming to terms with being gay and 'was rewarded with a round of applause.'²⁶ David Coffey reflected that it had not been 'universally appreciated, but the attempt to listen to one another in a non adversarial climate was largely welcomed'. At the November Council meeting a more substantive debate was held. Introduced by David Coffey, followed by an opportunity for Council members to study the Bible together in small groups, and then an open debate. Coffey's introduction set the Council in context and described various meetings that had been held with the Black and Asian pastors forum, the Network of Baptists Affirming Lesbian and Gay Christians and the Younger Leaders' Forum. He also referenced a paper that Nigel Wright had written and had been available to Council members in July.²⁷

Wright's paper argued that the Council was the best place for any reflection on the issue and that 'it was desirable for the Council to be enabled to make a number of gentle affirmations around the topic.'²⁸ These affirmations would be descriptive as well as prescriptive. Having made these suggestions, Wright,

following James Nelson,²⁹ identified four consistent Christian responses, which he labelled: (1) the rejecting-punitive position; (2) the rejecting-non-punitive position; (3) qualified acceptance; and (4) full acceptance. It was Wright's view that while both (1) and (4) were present in Baptist churches, most people would reflect position (2) with some 'oscillation' to (3) for practical pastoral and civil involvement reasons. Wright believed that the interaction between (2) and (3) provided a 'fruitful way forward' in ongoing reflection. Any move towards (3) would require some change to the MR guidelines, but Wright recognised that to do that would be 'highly contentious'.

Coffey proposed that the Council agreed not to put forward any public resolutions on the issue but instead explored setting up an education process. The Council debate was once again reflective of a range of views. A resolution of Council was passed that stated:

*Council affirms the importance of discussing, deliberating and reflecting together at all levels of the Union on issues of human sexuality. They do not regard public resolutions, voting and parliamentary style debates as appropriate methods for addressing these issues.*³⁰

Following the Council a new Human Sexuality Working Group (HSWG) was set up to provide an education tool for churches.³¹ This group would report in 2005.

In 2003 Jeffrey John was nominated to become the next Bishop of Reading. John is a gay Christian and Anglican priest.³²

When asked for their views by the Baptist Times, nine Regional Ministers Team Leaders 'expressed serious reservations'³³ and all supported the position in the BU Ministerial Recognition Rules. Jonathan Edwards, then Regional Minister Team Leader for the South West Baptist Association, said 'I am delighted that our Ministerial Recognition Rules make our position as Baptists abundantly clear on the issue of homosexuality'. Malcolm Goodspeed, then Head of Ministry, also made clear that any 'minister who did publicly express [that same-sex relationships are in any way equivalent to Christian marriage] would be asked to resign from the accredited list.'³⁴ Following this 'ten senior Baptist leaders' wrote an open letter asking the Baptist Union to change or suspend the guideline in the MR Rules that restricted speech, arguing that it 'affects the openness of any debate on the subject of homosexuality'.³⁵ Michael Docker, one of the signatories, said 'the aim was not to see lesbian and gay relationships receive the same status as marriages in Baptist churches, merely to allow the debate on the subject to be freely aired'. In response, Myra Blyth, then Deputy General Secretary said 'the aim of the guidelines was not "to gag" people'. An exchange of letters followed in the *Baptist Times* from August through to December.

In 2005 the HSWG reported. The process the group presented was focused on education and informing church members to make decisions. They argued that the 'distinctive location of these decisions should begin and end with the local Church Meeting'.³⁶ They decided not to produce a book, to avoid the material becoming mistaken for the Union's policy

on same-sex relationships. The education process included engagement with scripture, the contribution of science, a contribution from theology, and a set of pastoral case studies, with the aim at the end of the process for those who attended to be asked *do I understand why others see things differently, has my understanding changed and what one thing will I take away from the day?* The education process was agreed at the Council in November 2005. Coffey remarked that 'our independence as Baptist churches meant that there would inevitably be standards and decisions which a church might adopt which would be unacceptable to others.'³⁷ From 2007 onwards the education process was offered to churches via the Associations.³⁸

The next time the issue was raised significantly was in response to the Civil Partnerships Act, which had come into force in December 2005. It was not discussed at Council until 2009, although it had been the subject of a seminar at the 2006 Assembly led by Nigel Wright.³⁹ Wright argued that civil partnerships between same-sex couples should be accepted by Christians in light of the kind of society in which we find ourselves, but this does not mean that Christians should affirm same-sex relationships. This was Wright's free church, free state argument.⁴⁰ In 2009 the Ministry Department brought a paper to Council to look 'for affirmation from Council concerning the guidance it seeks to give.'⁴¹ The paper recognised the freedom churches had regarding this issue, but this was not so for ministers, who were required to comply with MR rules. Following the MR rules the report stated 'it would not be appropriate for

the Union to devise services of blessing for civil partnerships.' Its advice was that ministers 'should not participate formally in services of blessing,' outside those circumstances where there was a family member or close friend entering into such a partnership. This extended to ministers being expected not to enter into a civil partnership, although exceptional cases could be made where the civil partnership was clearly not sexual. The debate within Council once again expressed a range of views, and at the end a straw poll was taken which supported the Ministry Department and Executive's position. It also affirmed a 'commitment to the educational process...and, recognising the diversity of voices within our Union of churches, [and as such to] continue to engage in a journey to seek the mind of Christ in mutual respect and fellowship.'

In 2011 there was a discussion at the March Council over whether the Network of Baptists Affirming Gay and Lesbian Relationships could be included in the Baptist Union Directory in the section listing Baptist Organisations. This was related to a discussion over whether the Network could have a stall at the Assembly. The Faith & Unity Executive proposed that the language of 'Baptist Organisations' be changed to 'Baptists Organising Themselves' reflecting that the organisations and groups listed did not necessarily have Union approval and therefore give space for the Network to be listed. It also proposed that they 'commit to working with the Network to make its purposes clearly known and recognised, so enabling its ministry of care and support to be available in the BUGB' and that this to be done 'sensitively,

carefully and prayerfully.'⁴² The Council decided not to support the inclusion of the Network in the Directory (48 in favour, 61 against, 7 abstentions), but did support the Faith and Unity second proposal (87 for, 10 against, 14 abstentions).

The subject of same-sex relationships came back onto the agenda in January 2013 when Steve Chalke, a public Christian leader and an accredited Baptist minister 'came out' in favour of same-sex relationships and declared he had taken part in the blessing of a civil partnership.⁴³ This hit the mainstream news and the Baptist Union had to respond. A carefully worded response by the Team Leaders of the Ministries and Faith & Society Teams appeared on the *Baptist Times* website⁴⁴ which was supportive of Steve Chalke's ministry, made reference to other responses,⁴⁵ and stated the position of the Council at that point. The response concludes:

Baptists have attempted to avoid the more destructive controversies amongst other church traditions in recent years, turning instead to an educational programme for churches and ministers that continues to be used occasionally, but since Baptists have the same passion for effective mission as others (and like to think in greater measure) this wrestling with our acceptance or rejection of homosexuality is unavoidable. Many Baptists (including the majority of members of Baptist Union Council when it last debated the matter) will find Steve Chalke's conclusions and practice of a radical inclusion and affirmation of those in the gay community simply wrong. But let the Baptist community recognize that 'the sin' of affirming faithful,

committed homosexual relationships is no worse than the sin of breaking covenant fellowship, or calling your brother and sister a 'fool', or worse. Let it too acknowledge that Steve Chalke's conclusion arises from a pastoral and missional commitment to a gospel imperative 'to love one's neighbour as oneself; an imperative that, together with loving God for all we're worth, should shape all of our discipleship.

At the beginning and end of the piece Steve Chalke writes that the 'real question' for the Church is 'the nature of inclusion.' 'Rather than condemn and exclude, can we dare to create an environment for homosexual people where issues of self-esteem and wellbeing can be talked about; where the virtues of loyalty, respect, interdependence and faithfulness can be nurtured, and where exclusive and permanent same-sex relationships can be supported?' he asks. For many, the answer will be 'yes, but not in the way you envisage it, Steve. The support must be for the living of a life apart from the sexual expression of intimacy' while some may welcome Steve Chalke's vision without such reservations. The challenge for all Baptists is how to live with one another while holding differing views on this matter, and the virtues most eagerly to be sought in this debate must therefore be humility and compassion.⁴⁶

The Union also published two other Baptist responses, by Steve Holmes and Andrew Kleissner, in the *Baptist Times*. Holmes' was a re-post of his response on the EA website.⁴⁷ He supported Chalke for asking the right questions but questions his hermeneutics and as a result his

conclusions. Kleissner's response asked the denomination to study the issue openly hearing all views and for the removal of the advocacy clause in the MR rules to make it possible for ministers to participate fully.⁴⁸

At the March Council that year a joint proposal from the Transitional Steering Group through the Ministry Executive and Faith & Society Team asked, 'Does Council wish to review its guidance on Civil Partnerships?' It acknowledged that the publicity around Steve Chalke's announcement meant it was impossible to avoid talking about it. It also stated that it recognised the tensions between the current guidance and the wishes of a local church meeting where the minister served. The other pressing issue was the likelihood that marriage would be extended to same-sex couples. In the April edition of *Transform* (the BU magazine), Paul Goodliff, then Head of Ministry, welcomed the debate and that ministers were free to discuss same-sex relationships without fear of sanction.⁴⁹ The 2013 Assembly held at the beginning of May made space in the Monday Plenary session for a discussion of same-sex relationships.⁵⁰ This included a scripted conversation to open up the issues, the story of one regional minister who had a gay son, and small group discussion which then allowed a range of voices to feedback. The aim was to listen and talk and create the context for a continuing conversation.

One contributor to that continuing conversation was once again Nigel Wright who wrote a paper published on the Fresh Streams website.⁵¹ Wright

offers an argument for why it might be appropriate to support and bless same-sex relationships, before stating 'I am not persuaded my own conscience would permit me to bless a same-sex relationship in anything other than very restricted circumstances.' The rest of the paper gives his reasons, which were drawn from scripture and a theology of marriage. He argues that as a minister he is not 'mandated or authorised as a Christian minister to bless what God has not blessed.' He leaves space that 'a civil partnership represents a responsible and achievable course of action' and concludes that 'others might judge and act differently in accordance with their conscience.'

At the Assembly the following year the national Baptist Steering group issued a statement, which sought to summarise the conversations that had taken place up to that point:⁵²

As a union of churches in covenant together we will respect the differences on this issue which both enrich us and potentially could divide as we seek to live in fellowship under the direction of our Declaration of Principle 'That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.'

Upholding the liberty of a local church to determine its own mind on this matter, in accordance with our Declaration of Principle, we also recognise the freedom

of a minister to respond to the wishes of their church, where their conscience permits, without breach of disciplinary guidelines.

We affirm the traditionally accepted Biblical understanding of Christian marriage, as a union between a man and a woman, as the continuing foundation of belief in our Baptist Churches.

A Baptist minister is required to live and work within the guidelines adopted by the Baptist Union of Great Britain regarding sexuality and the ministry that include 'a sexual relationship outside of Christian marriage (as defined between a man and a woman) is deemed conduct unbecoming for a minister.'

This statement put the Declaration of Principle front and centre and gave permission for the first time for accredited ministers to participate in services of marriage or blessing where the church meeting gave its support and conscience permitted. Not well publicised at the time, the MR rule prohibiting ministers from advocating same-sex relationships as equivalent to marriage was removed.

Two years later (in 2016) the Council made a further statement following a 'time of intense prayer, careful listening and respectful discussion' which: affirmed the 'Union's historic Biblical understanding of marriage', affirmed the liberty of the local church (as set out in the Declaration of Principle), the importance of mission, and issued a call to walk together in unity. It was this final section, on walking together in unity that was perhaps most important:

Reflecting on the issue of churches registering their buildings for same sex

marriage, Council recognises areas of genuine and deep disagreement. We believe that these are dimensions of the tension of living with unity and diversity. We continue to seek God's grace as we 'walk together and watch over one another' under the authority of Christ. In the light of this, recognising the costs involved and after careful and prayerful reflection and listening, we humbly urge churches who are considering conducting same-sex marriages to refrain from doing so out of mutual respect. At the same time, we also humbly urge all churches to remain committed to our Union out of mutual respect; trusting that the one who unites us is stronger than what divides us.

Here it sought to ask local churches who were considering registering their buildings to 'refrain from doing so out of mutual respect', that is, for the sake of unity. This is followed by an acknowledgement that some churches would go ahead and register their buildings, and so asked other churches to 'remain committed to our Union'. An accompanying letter from the General Secretary said that the statement reflected the Council coming to 'a settled place.'

In January 2017, a small group of Baptist ministers issued their own statement which they called *The Courage to be Baptist*.⁵³ This sought to provide an account of Baptist ecclesiology and call Baptists to a continuing conversation that sought not to 'reach unity by imposing uniformity' or by choosing to 'give up on our associational structures and become independents.' In addition to this statement, Stephen Holmes, one of

its authors has published three articles seeking to offer a theological exploration of human sexuality, which holds a traditional line, but makes some space for the possibility of some kind of pastoral accommodation.⁵⁴

What I have tried to do in this brief article is report a history that is not well known. In this story we discover that there has been some wisdom in how Baptists have handled this conversation: making space, encouraging study and listening, and avoiding public resolutions. This is not to suggest we have reached a 'settled place' and there are those, both affirming and non-affirming, for whom the current place is deeply unsettling. And, of course for those Baptist Christians who are gay and lesbian I do not suggest this process has been anything but painful and remains so. It is my reading that Baptists have moved on the issue of how to respond to same-sex relationships to a position that wants to be more welcoming and that this has generally been on pastoral grounds and because we now know more.⁵⁵ For some this has been and is a move too far, for others this has been and is a move not far enough.⁵⁶ It is also clear that the debate has moved from simply being one focused on what we think the Bible says to one focused on Baptist ecclesiology and the freedom that the Declaration of the Principle, which remains the basis of the Baptist Union, provides churches. This is where more work needs to be done, work beyond the scope of this paper, and where I hope and pray we continue to have the courage to be Baptist, walking together, despite deep disagreements, seeking the wisdom of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Notes to Text

1. A more comprehensive study would need to set this in the wider ecumenical and social context, especially in the changes in the law and the debate within the Church of England. See Mark Vasey-Saunders, *The Scandal of Evangelicals and Homosexuality* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016) and Stephen Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005). I use the language of 'homosexuality' because this was the terminology used through most of the period. I recognize it is now offensive to some and so in some places use the phrase 'same sex relationships.'
2. The working group was chaired by Paul Rowntree Clifford and other members were John Capon, David Cook, Harry Godden, Mike Landriau, Christine Rumbol and Don Black.
3. 'Aids: A Christian Response', see Baptist Union Council Minutes, November 1987.
4. 'Guidelines for Conduct Unbecoming,' Ministerial Recognition Rules 1991 (Baptist Union, 1991).
5. See BU Council Minutes, March 1988.
6. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980; E. Y. Mobery, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1983; Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Fortress, 1983.
7. Although Tim Carter wrote an interesting letter in 2001 which suggests that Paul in his discussion of 'food' in Romans 14-15 provides a helpful framework to discuss homosexuality, *Baptist Times* August 9, 2001, 12.
8. *Something to Celebrate*, Church House Publishing, 1995.
9. This was the first service for gay people to be held officially in an Anglican Cathedral. For a history of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement see Sean Gill (ed), *The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement*, London: Cassell, 1998. Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church hosted an early event of the LGCM (then just GCM) in October 1977.
10. Riglin was then minister of Amersham Free Church, Buckinghamshire. He would become an Anglian priest in 2008 and in 2021 was appointed Bishop of Argyll & The Isles in the Scottish Episcopal Church.
11. Keith G. Riglin, 'Homosexuality: A Christian View,' *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, 254 (April 1996), 11-15.
12. Robin J Giles, 'Homosexuality: A Christian View - A Flawed Appraisal?' *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, 255, (July 1996) 21-22.
13. Phil Jump, 'Community of Grace,' *Baptist Ministers' Journal* 323 (July 2014) 18-22; Keith John, 'Real Marriage,' *Baptist Ministers' Journal* 323 (July 2014) 22-26.
14. John Colwell has a chapter in the book *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* edited by Timothy Bradshaw (London: Hodder, 1997), 86-98, which was a collection of essays responding to the 1996 St Andrews statement. In a later work, *Promise and Presence*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005, a footnote in the chapter on marriage suggests that Colwell's position had moved. Paul Goodliff has a brief section in his *Care in a Confused Climate*, London: DLT, 1998, 167-71.
15. *Baptist Times* July 31, 1997, 5.
16. *Baptist Times* March 20, 1997, 2.
17. *Making Moral Choices in our Relationships*. Didcot: Baptist Union, 2000, 5.
18. *Making Moral Choices*, 9.
19. Minutes, Baptist Union Council March 2000, 21.
20. Supporting Documents, Baptist Union Council March 2000.
21. *Ibid*, 40.
22. Minutes, Baptist Union Council, March 2001, 2.
23. *Baptist Times* March 26, 1998, 6. Hugh Cross was a Baptist minister, who had worked for the British Council of Churches (1979-1990) and was the first Ecumenical Moderator of the Milton Keynes Christian Council (1990-1995). David Trafford was also a Baptist minister who had served churches in London and at the time was minister in Crouch End.
24. *Baptist Times* April 2, 1998, 11.
25. *Baptist Times* March 2001.
26. *Baptist Times* September 22, 2005, 8.
27. A version of the paper was published in Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002.
28. Nigel Wright, 'Baptists and the Sexuality Debate.' January 2001.

29. James Nelson, 'Homosexuality' in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* edited by John Macquarrie and James Childress. London: SCM, 1986, 271-4.
30. Minutes, Baptist Union Council, November 2001, 18.
31. Baptist Union of Great Britain Annual Report, 6. This group was chaired by Paul Goodliff and other members were Graham Sparkes, Ian Handscomb, John Colwell, Mary Whalley, Sue Clements-Jewery.
32. He is the author of *Permanent, Faithful, Stable: Christian Same-Sex Relationships* (1993, 2012).
33. *Baptist Times* July 3, 2003, 1. Seven were named John Claydon, Jonathan Edwards, Peter Grange, Brian Nicholls, Phil Jump, Paul Hills and Nigel Coles.
34. *Baptist Times* June 26, 2003, 1.
35. *Baptist Times* August 14, 2003, 1, 6. The ten were Brian Haymes, Vaughan Rees, Michael Docker, Mary Coates, Gethin Abraham Williams, Gareth Dyer, Bob Mills, Hazel Sherman and Stephen Henderson.
36. *Interim Report of the Working Group on Human Sexuality*, March 2005, 1.
37. Minutes, Baptist Union Council, November 2005, 12.
38. Uptake was slow but increased post 2013.
39. Members of the Network of Baptists Affirming Lesbian and Gay Christians also participated, although this was not reported by the *Baptist Times*, May 4, 2006.
40. See Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State*. Paternoster, 2005.
41. Minutes, Baptist Union Council, November 2009, 7.
42. Minutes, Baptist Union Council, March 2011, 4-7.
43. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Featured-Topics/Homosexuality/The-Bible-and-Homosexuality-Part-One>
44. The Baptist Times ceased publication as a newspaper in 2012 and was now entirely online.
45. The other responses referenced were those by Steve Clifford (Evangelical Alliance Director), Steve Holmes (Head of Policy, EA), Malcolm Duncan and David Kerrigan (Director, BMS).
46. *Baptist Times*, January 2013.
47. Steve Holmes, 'Homosexuality and Hermeneutics: Creating Counter-Cultural Communities', 15 Jan 2013. <https://www.eauk.org/church/stories/homosexuality-and-hermeneutics.cfm>
48. Kleissner had written in the *Baptist Times* previously on the subject of civil partnerships, *Baptist Times*, February 25, 2011, 11.
49. *Transform* 34, April 2013, 11.
50. https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/369399/Monday_Morning_Plenary.aspx.
51. <https://freshstreams.net/wp-content/uploads/Nigel-Wright-The-blessing-of-civil-partnerships.pdf> (Fresh Streams are a network of charismatic Baptists that developed out of Mainstream in 2011.)
52. This was largely written by Paul Goodliff and Stephen Keyworth, who was the Faith & Society Team Leader.
53. The group included Stephen Holmes, David Kerrigan, Simon Woodman, Ruth Gouldbourne, Beth Allison-Glenny, Glen Marshall and myself. See 'The Courage to be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality', *Baptist Quarterly* 48.1 (January 2017), 2-10.
54. See Stephen Holmes, 'Should We Welcome and Affirm?' in *Revisioning, Renewing, Rediscovering: Essays in Honor of Stanley Grenz* edited by Derek Tidball et al, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014, 121-34; 'Listening to the Past and Reflecting on the Present' in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016, 166-93; and 'On not handling Snakes' in *Marriage, Family and Relationships*, London: Apollos, 2017, 256-75.
55. We know more stories of gay Christians, we know more gay persons, we know that there are different ways of reading scripture.
56. Those who are affirming of same-sex relationships have become increasingly vocal and 'political' compared with the early days of the Network for Baptists Affirming Lesbian and Gay Christians.

The Real Birthday of Jesus

by John Dyer

Author: John Dyer is a Baptist minister who served for 33 years with BMS World Mission in Brazil, mainly in theological education. He is the author of several books.

We are invariably told that 25 December is not the real date of Christmas. That may be true. We are also told that we do not know the real date when Jesus was born in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago. That may not be true.

The key which unlocks the secret surrounding the birth of Jesus is found in the Bible itself. We shall get our first clue in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord' ... Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in life.' The angel answered, 'I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to

tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.' (Luke 1:8-25)

To find the clue contained in the story of the angel's visit to Zechariah, we need to find out when he was in the temple performing his priestly duties. This was not a duty he exercised full-time. We are given details of when Zechariah would have been on duty in the temple from 1 Chronicles 24. There were more priests in the land of Israel than were required at any one time, so a rota was established. This rota prescribed that each of the priestly families would take it in turn to serve the Lord in the temple. Each family would serve for a fortnight once a year according to a timetable which we find in the first book of Chronicles. By reading the passage in Luke dealing with this (1:5-7), we discover that Zechariah belonged

to the family of Abijah. Members of this Jewish family had their designated period of two weeks to serve in the temple, and this was the eighth period of service among the 24 in total.

They divided them impartially by dividing lots, for there were officials of the sanctuary and officials of God among the descendants of both Eleazar and Ithamar. The scribe Shemiah son of Nethanel, a Levite, recorded their names in the presence of the king and of the officials: Zadok the priest, Ahimelech son of Abiathar and the heads of families of the priests and of the Levites - one family being taken from Eleazar and then one from Ithamar.

The first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah, the third to Harim, the fourth to Seorim, the fifth to Malkijah,

the sixth to Mijamin, the seventh to Hakkoz, the eighth to Abijah (1 Chronicles 24:5-10)

The Jewish year began in mid-March. Therefore, Zechariah's period of service in the temple would have coincided with the second half of the Jewish month of Tammuz, which, in turn, coincides with the end of our month of June and the beginning of July.

It was during this time that Zechariah had an incredible encounter with a messenger from the Lord – an angel named Gabriel. This angel informed Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant and have a child. Now Elizabeth was already beyond childbearing age, so it came as a great surprise to Zechariah to receive this news. After this, Zechariah went home, and his wife conceived and

The Hebrew calendar and its Western Equivalent

wikipedia.org

Month Number

Ecclesiastical/ Biblical	Civil	Hebrew month	Length	Gregorian
1	7	Nissan	30	Mar-Apr
2	8	Iyar	29	Apr-May
3	9	Sivan	30	May-Jun
4	10	Tammuz	29	Jun-Jul
5	11	Av	30	Jul-Aug
6	12	Elul	29	Aug-Sep
7	1	Tishri	30	Sep-Oct
8	2	Cheshvan (or Marcheshvan)	29/30	Oct-Nov
9	3	Kislev	30/29	Nov-Dec
10	4	Tevet	29	Dec-Jan
11	5	Shevat	30	Jan-Feb
12	6	Adar	29	Feb-Mar

became pregnant as the angel had said. This would have been during the first half of the month of July. The angel also told Zechariah what name the child should have. That name was John. From that time on, Zechariah lost the ability to speak. This lasted until the child was born, nine months later. When the child was born, John regained his ability to speak, and the first words that he spoke were to declare the name of his newborn son. This child was to become known in adulthood as John the Baptist.

Six months after Elizabeth became pregnant, a messenger of the Lord came to a young girl in the town of Nazareth, in the region of Galilee. The angel Gabriel brought a message to Mary that she could hardly believe.

In the sixth month (of Elizabeth's pregnancy), God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.'

(Luke 1:26-31)

Mary became pregnant six months after Elizabeth, and here is the piece of the jigsaw that enables us to determine the date (or at least the time of year) when Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

As a result of our investigation, we can situate the birth of Jesus at some point between late September and early October. This is interesting for those mapping God's timeline. There is a pattern to the way God works, and the significance of this period during the Jewish calendar could cause us to sit up. But before we get there, let me explain a couple of things concerning God's timing.

If we look in Deuteronomy 16, we will see that each year Israel commemorated several religious festivals. Among these, three held a place of special significance: Passover; Feast of Weeks (Pentecost); Feast of Tabernacles.

The following are images of the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals and their Christian equivalent:

Jewish Passover (Pesach)



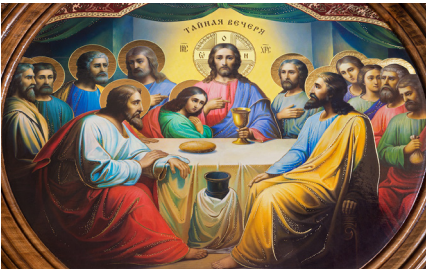
Jewish Feast of Weeks (Shavuot)



Jewish Tabernacles (Sukkot)



Christian Easter



Christian Pentecost



Christian



The first of these comes at the beginning of the Jewish year. It is the Feast of Passover. This festival commemorates the end of Israel's captivity in Egypt (also the barley harvest or firstfruits). The second religious festival comes 50 days later and was when the Jewish nation remembered the giving of the law to Moses (also known as the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost). The third of these religious festivals came in the autumn and is known as the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the wanderings of God's people in the Sinai desert.

What is interesting about this is that two Christian festivals coincide with these Jewish festivals. At Passover Jesus Christ was crucified and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church. These are two of the most significant events in the Christian year. The other significant event, of course, is the birth of Jesus. If we now look at the Jewish and Christian calendars side by side, according to the chronology taken from Zechariah's stint in the temple service, we will see that the birth of Jesus appears to have happened during the Feast of Tabernacles. So, each of the main Jewish festivals commemorate an event in Israel's history, and the three main Christian festivals interestingly coincide with these.

We should, at least, ask ourselves that if God intervened in human history in a significant way at the Jewish festivals of Passover and Pentecost, what did he do at the Feast of Tabernacles? Our findings lead us to conclude that God had a plan for all three Jewish festivals. The missing piece of the jigsaw (when was Jesus

born?) fits perfectly into God's plan, when we match the six festivals, Christian and Jewish, with their opposite number in these respective traditions. As an astute Christian friend of mine has said: 'I wonder if the opening of John's gospel was inspired by that knowledge?'

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (or literally pitched his tent or 'tabernacled') among us.

(John 1:14)

Nevertheless, you would expect someone to throw a spanner in the works. According to the Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37-AD 100), by the time of 1st century Palestine, the divisions of the priests were carried out during two separate weeks of the year, rather than for a fortnight, once a year. Alfred Edersheim, in his study of the temple at the time of Jesus Christ writes: 'Each of the twenty-four courses into which not only the priests and the Levites, but also all Israel, by means of representatives, were divided, served for one week, from Sabbath to Sabbath, distributing the daily service among their respective families or houses.' In addition, all the priests were expected to serve at the three annual pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. It is considered by some commentators that Zechariah was, in fact, serving during one of these pilgrimage festivals, because of the large number of people (Greek *plethos*) gathered at the temple, when the angel came and announced that his wife would become pregnant.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

(Luke 1:10)

If the divisions of the priests were weekly, then that of Abijah would have taken place in early May and then again in early November. In this respect, we should make allowance for the fact that the Jewish year was governed by the lunar cycle of 29.5 days and was, therefore, not the same as our western calendar. By this calculation, Zechariah's normal service in the temple may have coincided with the Feast of Weeks, which drew pilgrims from all over the country. If, on the other hand, the divisions were fortnightly, then he would have been one of the serving priests during late June or early July. This timing would not have coincided with any of the pilgrimage festivals.

However, the plethora of people could have arisen at the 'hour of prayer', which regularly occurred in the temple each day at nine in the morning, midday and three in the afternoon, incense being offered at the first and last of these. But it is the dating of Zechariah's temple service in June/July that ultimately leads to a point during the Feast of Tabernacles for the birth of Jesus. Interestingly, if it were during the Feast of Tabernacles that Zechariah was on duty in the temple (as he would have been exceptionally for the pilgrimage festivals), then Jesus could have been born around the end of December (the 25th is a date favoured by St John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, and was first adopted and celebrated by the church in AD 336).

In an old list of Roman bishops, compiled in AD 354 these words appear for AD 336:

25 Dec.: natus Christus in Betleem Judeae. (December 25th, Christ born in Bethlehem, Judea.)

This day, December 25, 336, is the first recorded celebration of Christmas (Christianity.com, June 2007).

Even so, as many commentators observe, this date in winter does not rest easily with the shepherds being in the fields looking after their flocks by night, which is not usual, even in the warmer climes of Palestine, when it is cold and wet at that time of year. But is there another reason why Christmas is celebrated on this day in particular?

A friend and former missionary colleague, with a close interest in the subject, has offered the following insightful observation: 'What led to the widespread acceptance of a celebration of 25th December was that it coincided with the old pagan celebration of the Winter festival, just after the shortest day of the year (in the northern hemisphere), when the hope of the coming summer was being born again. This was also a time when two out of every three men in the Roman Empire were slaves, among whom the gospel had great acceptance. The only day in the year granted as a holiday to the slaves was 25th December, and they had wanted to celebrate this as a Christian festival. This was their testimony that Jesus had transformed their lives with the hope of God with them, transforming the celebration of a carnival of debauchery into the celebration of the coming of the one who had changed their lives.' And so the custom of celebrating Christ's birth on this particular day has become rooted in Christian tradition.

But, if Jesus was, in fact, born at the turn of the months of September and October (as we have argued in this short essay),

then he was conceived of the Holy Spirit at around the time of year when we celebrate Christmas. The real miracle of Christmas is not the birth of Jesus. This happened in the way that every other human being enters the world, after a nine-month period of gestation in the womb. He was born of a woman and of a woman's seed. This gives Jesus his humanity. The real miracle lies in the fact that he was conceived of the Holy Spirit. This gives Jesus his divinity. So, we are celebrating Christmas at the right time of year, but, perhaps, not for the reason we think. Though we celebrate the birth of Christ on 25 December, what really happened on that day was that which the angel declared to Mary: 'The power of the Most High will come upon you and you shall bear a son.' What we can now say and what we now know is that 25 December is not the arbitrary date that we thought it was.

There is one further interesting discovery to make. The Jews expect the Messiah to come during the Feast of Tabernacles in a future sense. They are right, except that for Christians he has already come, and he came, as the Jews predict he will, during the Feast of Tabernacles; but not at some point in the future (though we believe this also at his second coming), rather as an event that has already taken place.

The Biblical World of Baptists Reflected in the 1644 London Confession

by Michael Jackson

Author: Michael Jackson is now retired from Baptist ministry but continues to write historical articles.

In Great Britain, among the heirs of the great 16th century Reformation, Episcopalians and Presbyterians were dominant over Independents (Congregationalists), Quakers and Baptists, which were comparatively small in number and influence. Oppressive laws and constraints on freedom of worship and conscience ensured that no small sacrifice was required to identify with such communities. And so it would have remained, had it not been for the great constitutional struggle between King and Parliament issuing in the English Civil War which, though tragic in terms of the great loss of life and tearing apart of families, succeeded, at least for a few short years, in unblocking the road to an unprecedented degree of religious freedom, a major beneficiary of which were the Baptists in terms of their subsequent growth and development of institutional life.

A major influence on such growth can be traced to the numbers of individuals with Baptist convictions eager to serve in the Parliamentary army, leading in turn to the establishment of new communities of Baptist life, for it has been observed that such nascent communities often appeared along the routes taken by the army as it marched to confront the Royalist forces.¹ Since Oliver Cromwell was as concerned for religious freedom as he was for the sovereign rights of Parliament, the ethos of the New Model

Army harmonised with those who shared his deeply held convictions.² Now it is far from easy for an observer within modern secular society to relate to the wider context of this politico-religious struggle, among the most creative and far-reaching of all epochs. But just as the Reformation in Europe caught fire so quickly and spread so rapidly largely because it spoke to minds and hearts already attuned to its message, so it was in 17th century England, releasing a great flood of ideas and convictions which, in turn, spawned a range of organised expressions. The lid had blown off and, at least for a few short years, it seemed to many that the kingdom of God was imminent, giving rise in some quarters to fervent millenarian expectation.

The Contemporary Context

At the same time, secular forces were emerging in the shape of Thomas Hobbes and others who, with a rationalistic mindset, interpreted human life very differently. Hobbes (1588-1679), best known for the volume *Leviathan*, was one of the founders of modern political theory. Prompted by the crisis of the Civil War, in this book he argued that to be safe and secure society must cede some of its key rights to the ruling power, so establishing a social contract.³ Though nominally a member of the Church of England, Hobbes was a forerunner of that thoroughgoing materialism with which

we are familiar today.⁴ Such a philosophy had the effect of helping to set in train two parallel world views: the secular, in which God was no longer an unquestioned presupposition, and the religious. So, while much of the social ferment characterising the 17th century focused on theology and ecclesiology, the first signs of engagement across the religious/secular divide were beginning to appear.

It is a truism to state that under the impulse of the Reformation the Bible, newly available in the vernacular, resulted in every reader becoming his or her own interpreter, constructing their own biblical world independent of any external authority. The Cromwellian era is an especially interesting one in which to examine and evaluate how scripture was being understood and applied, so shaping individuals and churches in the unprecedented context of social revolution. This forms the subject of the essay.

What is immediately clear is that, unlike in some other periods, the strict separation of the religious and the political was alien since God's writ was understood to extend to both in a seamless fashion; although the balance of emphasis varied from time to time and between different faith communities, some stressing the socio-political implications of scripture, others the spiritual, so when Calvinistic Baptists came to shape their influential Confession of 1644, drawing heavily upon the earlier Separatist Confession of 1596, they pointedly omitted reference to the magistrate's duty to enforce right belief and worship activities. By so doing they maintained the integrity of churches by denying political interference, though they were careful to profess obedience to the state in 'all things lawful'.⁵

On the other hand, the influence of movements which could be seen to challenge the status quo certainly made its appeal among Baptists. Led by such as 'Freeborn Jack' Lilburne, Levellers and associated Diggers envisioned suffrage for the common man, the overturning of class and privilege, and an agrarian revolution, in which land was free and available to all.⁶ Though a short-lived phenomenon, it could be seen as reflecting something of the upside-down kingdom values of Jesus (Mark 10:23-25; Luke 13:29-30) and the voluntary communism of the early church (Acts 4:32-37). Another political threat had a different impulse: biblical apocalyptic. This movement took its name from the fifth world kingdom in Daniel which shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44), for the Fifth Monarchists, inspired by the cataclysmic changes in society, saw it as presaging the second coming of Christ.⁷ It appears to have particularly attracted adherents from among Calvinistic Baptists.⁸ In the climate of the day, all such movements represented a potential threat to the established order. This was certainly so where Baptists were concerned, due to the lingering memory of Thomas M nzer and the Anabaptist catastrophe of 1524, a name which, significantly, the London Confession of 1644, in its preface, disavowed. Such extreme radicalism defined the limits of the heady enthusiasm for revolutionary change when, for a moment, all things seemed possible.

But whether the 17th century believer was more politically or spiritually focused, their centre of gravity was undoubtedly the Bible; and to such a degree that it was unquestionably the source, from which ultimate truth could be mined, if one was sufficiently diligent and discerning. What

is more, God was conceived as immanent, involved with every avenue of human life, such that his hand could be discerned in the unprecedented times and at every turn: guiding, warning, blessing.⁹ At the same time the evolution of thought resulting in the rise of reason, together with scientific method, were beginning to make inroads into the public square via Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza et al.¹⁰ Related to this, modern biblical criticism was on the horizon, eventually becoming indispensable for the interpretation of scripture, though in this period the Bible was still read uncritically without historical and cultural questions being raised. Thus we should not expect interpretation at this time beyond a literal reading.

A Critical Examination of the 1644 London Confession

The contemporary literature which exemplifies the handling of biblical material includes the confessions of faith circulated by Baptists to identify their communities as non-heretical, belonging to the Christian mainstream.¹¹ Among these, the 1644 Confession (revised 1646), the work of seven London churches, though endorsed by the wider Particular Baptist community, is of especial importance. It consists of 52 doctrinal statements, so it is a substantial document, addressing the nature of God, Christology, the ministry of the church, baptism, relationship to the state etc. What is striking is that there is hardly a single doctrine unsupported by biblical references from both testaments; it is saturated in scripture. This constant recourse to the Bible, it is hoped, would reassure the wider church and society at large that Baptists were not just a fringe sect which could readily be dismissed as beyond the pale of orthodoxy. The aim, so

the preface declares, is to 'take off those aspersions...unjustly cast upon us'

Early in the Confession its Calvinistic roots are clear when it speaks of foreordaining the elect to eternal life and consigning the rest to condemnation.¹² Overall, the methodology is the gathering, eclectically, of a variety of biblical texts to buttress the truth of each doctrine. Sometimes a single word, such as 'grace', is sufficient to serve this purpose. At other times it is not immediately obvious why some texts are selected. Throughout there is a lack of an historical sense and contextual awareness, so that everything in scripture can be read on the same level. With reference to the Old Testament, in the Genesis story (3:15), for example, the prophecy that the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent's head is assumed to refer to Christ the redeemer, as often in church history, on the assumption that the biblical writer spoke better than he knew, even if not faithful to the original context.¹³ Similarly, in a doctrine addressing Christology, the character of Jacob's son Judah (Genesis 49:9-10) is reapplied to Jesus, though the former is called a 'lion's whelp'.¹⁴ Such a prophetic way of interpreting Scripture is baldly stated: 'In this written Word God has plainly revealed...Christ'.¹⁵ Even the Song of Solomon (Song 1:3), originally a celebration of human love, is marshalled to describe Christ in his threefold office as prophet, priest and king, presumably in view of the reference in the Song to 'anointing', another illustration of seeing Christ at every turn in the Old Testament.¹⁶ In the context of the clause relating to the kingdom of Christ, the Confession describes Satan as the enemy of God, quoting in support Job, chapters 1 and 2.¹⁷ But this is a later development of the character of Satan, who, in Job, is no more

than one of the heavenly beings who tests the faith of Job. Such examples reflect the hermeneutical approach of the Confession when it comes to Old Testament exegesis.

Its use of the New Testament is such that the great majority of books—23 of the 27—are referred to in the course of the Confession, omitting only Philemon, James, and 2 and 3 John. With the exception of the gospel of John, the four gospels are cited sparsely in comparison with the epistles. Contemporary exegesis works with the understanding that individual New Testament books tend to reflect distinctive theologies so that each has its own character. But here the unquestioned assumption is that they all reflect exactly the same viewpoint, so that the subtle differences are unperceived. Notwithstanding, the care and assiduousness displayed in building up a comprehensive Baptist theology is admirable. Little wonder that this Confession served Baptist life well, providing a yardstick with which to measure its biblical integrity.

In terms of volume, it is largely christocentric, closely followed by the nature of the church, (including baptism), and its relationship to the state. As regards the Trinity, God the Father occupies the opening few clauses, but there is very little reference to the Holy Spirit throughout. It appears, on the face of it, that the Baptist life portrayed is rooted in the Word, less so in the Spirit, though actual community life may have been different.

When the Confession considers the doctrine of God, although many texts are quoted to substantiate it, it is surprising that comparatively few derive from the four gospels, so that Jesus' teaching

on the subject is conspicuous by its absence. As a consequence, the aspect of God as a loving, forgiving Father is missing, resulting in God portrayed as a remote being often described in terms of his capacity to judge as in 'the Lord will render vengeance in flaming fire to them that know not God..' ¹⁸ In stressing the immutability of God's decrees, it admits that sometimes his sayings [in scripture] seem to be at variance, 'yet the sense... always agrees with the decree.'¹⁹ Here the 17th century attempts to square the circle which biblical scholarship would now explain in terms of different biblical people striving to comprehend the ways of God in this world.

Because much space is given to the theology of Christ, his life and work are amply described. The categories are prophet, priest and king. There is here a strong determinism by means of which Jesus acts out exactly the salvation plan of his heavenly Father, as when the Confession applies the call of Isaiah to him: 'The Lord called me before I was born..' (Isaiah 49:1).²¹ The risk here is to lessen Christ's freedom of will essential to that humanity portrayed in the gospel records, in which Jesus is portrayed as vulnerable to people and situations, and constantly involved in decision-making, culminating in the agony in the garden (Mark 14:32-42 and par). The Confession declares that unless Christ had been God incarnate he could never have perfectly understood the will of God.²² But to state in general terms that he obeyed the will of God perfectly, does not mean that he was saved from the struggle of knowing what best to do in the midst of life's dilemmas, as in the wilderness of Judaea, vividly described in the synoptics (Mark 1:12-13 and par).

Next, the Confession deals with the people of God, emphasising that they will be kept by him whatever life does to them, although the unforgivable apostasy in the Letter to the Hebrews (6:4-6) obviously does not appear in the supportive texts.²³ The stress is less on believing doctrine than on an intensely personal relationship with God, through Christ, quoting John 17:21, among others. Here is an unmistakable aspect of the authentic evangelical faith.²⁴ Such a relationship alone can fortify the believer in the spiritual warfare which is par for the course of Christian living.²⁵ In the context of the violent convulsions of the day this would surely have been a lived experience for many.

Although, as indicated above, the basis of the 1644 Confession was the earlier Separatist (Congregational) Confession of 1596, its Baptist identity is most obvious in the addition of two clauses on baptism. It is understood as an 'ordinance', thereby emphasising obedience to Christ's command (Luke 22:19, anamnesis).²⁶ Such a rite is the fruit of a living faith, permitting one to partake of the Lord's Supper (Were candidates formally received into membership at the table?). The second clause spells out the *modus operandi*, accompanied by the relevant New Testament texts.²⁷ It is most explicit: the whole body is dipped or plunged, signifying a spiritual washing and an identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection. Absent from the description of the rite is any reference to the laying on of hands at baptism. This is one of the issues which distinguished the General from the Particular Baptists, since for the former it was such a bone of contention that it breached fellowship between churches.²⁸ However, with the Particulars who drafted the 1644 Confession it does not appear

to have been an issue, hence silence on the subject. From the point of view of the New Testament evidence, this act is sometimes associated with baptism (Acts 8:16-17; 19:5-6) and sometimes not (Acts 8:12; 8:38), so there is fluidity of practice here. (In parenthesis, increasingly, British Baptists are bringing together these two ritual actions, so we are harmonising with 17th century General Baptists in this respect).

The concluding clauses of the Confession relate to the relationship with the secular state. In the unstable political situation of the day this was clearly a matter of high importance; it was necessary that the authorities know where Baptists and other sectarians stood vis-à-vis the law of the land. What was the nature of their citizenship? Such questions were especially relevant since separatists believed themselves to be called out of the (sinful) world to exercise liberty of conscience in creating self-governing communities of faith. Though the ethos of Cromwell's England was toleration, how far would this extend before the state intervened?²⁹ So it was unthinkable that our Baptist forebears of 1644 should not address such a timely issue.

In the five final clauses, 48-52, the Confession declares that the civil magistrate, the arm of the state, is God-appointed to commend or punish according to behaviour. To such authority the governed will be subject.³⁰ Such an assurance of a law-respecting and law-abiding community is clearly important in the light of the excesses and fanaticism to which the nation was being subjected. The biblical injunctions underwriting this affirmation include Paul's pivotal teaching in Romans

13. Following this, a qualifying clause envisages situations where, in extremis, obedience cannot be rendered. Given such a scenario, the penalty of the state will gladly be endured. Significantly, here there are no supporting scriptures since Paul, for example, teaches only on punishment for wilful law-breaking (Romans 13:3-4). Rather, what governs this clause is the priority of conscience: a quality which almost defines the Cromwellian era. Further, if it is the duty of the citizen to render obedience, it is the commensurate duty of the state to care for the safety and wellbeing of its citizens: an early expression of the social contract.³² In this case, the accompanying scriptures bear only tangentially on the issue.

The Confession goes on to declare that right behaviour for the believer is not driven by fear of state sanctions, rather by the desire to please the God of Christ, who is the ultimate arbiter of human behaviour, even if suffering is incurred as a result. The scriptures quoted from both Testaments include the experience of the early church in Acts when faced with the decision to obey God or the civil authority. Interestingly, it includes the persecution and faithfulness of God's people in Daniel (3:16-18), a book written expressly to put heart into a suffering nation, oppressed by Antiochus Epiphanes in the 2nd century BCE.³³ Added to this is the clause relating to social relationships which must be characterised by honesty and probity in transactions; and all 'men' (sic) honoured and respected.³⁴ Scripture includes Paul's injunctions in Romans 13, that the church be above reproach in its relationships with the world to avoid damaging criticism, frustrating its God-given mission. The Confession ends with the declaration that, throughout life, the believer is faced

with the decision of giving to God and the secular authority, deciding which has priority in each situation, with conscience foremost. As to be expected, prominent among the quoted scripture is Matthew 22:21, where Jesus expresses the principle that the believer has a dual responsibility in this world: to Caesar and to God.

Conclusion

The biblicism which characterises the 1644 Confession is typical of its time, since the Bible was widely considered the source of all truth. Clearly, it took the textual evidence for its convictions on their face value in a pre-critical era. Having said that, what impresses is the sheer volume of texts harvested to buttress each clause of the document, even if some inform the subject in hand less than others. Old Testament texts are invariably used in a typological fashion, with scant regard for their historical context. Those from the New Testament, usually from the epistles, rarely from the gospels, reflect texts which the authors considered relevant, though sometimes only tangential, to the doctrine in question.

Today, although Baptist life and thought has evolved since its publication, the concluding comments of this important Confession continue to inform the ethos of the denomination when it focuses on the centrality of Christ, the desire to be responsible citizens, the sacredness of individual conscience, and openness to new truth and understanding from the Word of God.

Notes to Text

1 A. C. Underwood, quoting W.T. Whitley in *A History of the English Baptists*. London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961, 85.

2 Ernest A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*. London: SCM, 1944, 44.

- 3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hobbes, first accessed 24-09-20.
- 4 Maurice Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963, 115-116.
- 5 B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*. Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996, 63-64.
- 6 Ashley, 91-92.
- 7 Payne, p43.
- 8 White, p57.
- 9 Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964, 182.
- 10 G. R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, 37-49.
- 11 White, 164.
- 12 Confession, clauses 3 and 4.
- 13 Clause 5.
- 14 Clause 9.
- 15 Clause 8.
- 16 Clause 14.
- 17 Clause 19.
- 18 Clause 6.
- 19 Clause 3.
- 20 Clause 14.
- 21 Clause 11.
- 22 Clause 16.
- 23 Clause 23.
- 24 Clause 27.
- 25 Clause 31.
- 26 Clause 39.
- 27 Clause 40.
- 28 White, 36-40.
- 29 Chadwick, 238.
- 30 Clause 48.
- 31 Clause 49.
- 32 Clause 50.
- 33 Clause 51.
- 34 Clause 52.

There is Hope: Preaching at Funerals—an Introduction by Paul Beasley-Murray

Author: Paul Beasley-Murray is now retired from ministry after serving in multiple roles but continues to write and reflect. His book is reviewed in this issue of bmj.

Some two years ago I attended the funeral of a good man who had filled his long life with many worthwhile activities. The church was crowded with old men in black suits, most of whom were wearing black ties. There were a few women present. The lady next to whom I sat told me that she believed in God, but didn't know where Jesus fitted in. She thought that all religions had the same 'head office', with Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism being 'branches' of the 'head office'. For her what counted in life was a moral system to live by.

After a lifetime of taking funerals, for me it was an interesting experience to attend a funeral in which I had no part. It is always instructive to see how other ministers handle a service, although on this occasion I had the impression that the service had in fact been largely drawn up by the family.

The dominating feature of the service was the six thoughtful tributes from former colleagues and friends. I had not realised how distinguished the deceased had been. Without exception the tributes were

interesting—but not one revealed whether the man we were honouring had been a person of faith.

In fact, apart from the opening and closing prayers there was no reference to Jesus, and the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying. Instead, the sermon was about how churches need to be places which encourage learning, which express love to the needy, and which create a legacy in the lives of future generations. All that is true, but this is not the gospel. At the end of the service the bereaved family were assured that the church would continue to pray for him in the hope that he might be received at the last by God and his angels!

I wondered, however, what all those black-suited men made of the service? I wonder what the lady sitting next to me made of the service? Indeed, I wondered what the family of the deceased made of the service? Would they have been surprised to discover that without the resurrection of Jesus there would be no church—indeed, that there would be no Christianity?

As Baptist minister Paul Sheppy has rightly said, at a funeral it is not enough for the story of the dead person to be told honestly, rather that narrative needs to be framed in the story of Jesus whose death and resurrection assure us that our death is not God's last word. He went on:

What we say here addresses the central questions of the funeral and offers a Christian answer. 'Where is daddy now?' and 'What will God do to our friend?' are questions that will be asked whether we wish it or not. We need to be ready to speak of God's love in Christ from which not even death can separate us (Romans 8.38-39).

If we do not offer Christ's answer to the question, in what sense has the funeral been a Christian one? If we do not lead people to the love of God, where is that hope of which the Scripture speaks?¹

It was in part because of this experience that I decided to write *There is Hope: Preaching at Funerals*. Before writing the book I had assumed that a funeral service will always include a sermon. However, to my surprise I discovered that this has not always been the case. In the Church of England, for instance, *The Book of Common Prayer* contains no provision for a sermon; *The Alternative Service Book 1980* simply says that 'a sermon may be preached';² by contrast, *Common Worship* states 'a sermon is preached.'³ Even Baptists, for whom the sermon is sometimes said to be 'the primary sacrament', used to regard the sermon at a funeral as optional;⁴ whereas the latest British Baptist worship manual states that 'a sermon follows' the reading of scripture.⁵ Although God clearly can speak through the scriptures alone, nonetheless I am convinced that there is a place at a funeral for the minister to declare the Good News of Jesus, and in this way 'confront the reality of death with the hope of resurrection.'⁶ In that regard I find it significant that a survey of ministers and bereaved people in Sheffield in 1989/1990 found that 'for many bereaved people the address is the part of the funeral which is remembered most clearly and which represents the greatest source of comfort.'⁷

I believe that, as with all preaching, the funeral address needs to be rooted in God's Word. The Bible is the source of the preacher's authority. The task of the preacher is to enable people to hear God speak to them. In practical terms this

means that preachers will normally need to have a passage of scripture to expound. My impression is that this is more the exception than the rule and that there is probably more topical preaching at funerals (and weddings) than at almost any other occasion. In that regard I checked out a collection of sermon outlines, and of the 13 outlines for a funeral, only two had a suggested scripture reading.⁸ The danger of this approach is that funeral sermons easily become a repetition of tired generalities.

As with all preaching, the address needs to be relevant to the congregation. Inevitably at a funeral the preacher will want to relate the sermon to the loved one who has died. However, the primary task of the preacher is not to give a eulogy, but to speak of the hope that Jesus offers us all.

As a result, *There Is Hope: Preaching at Funerals* is essentially a series of sermons on the Christian hope preceded by a study of the scripture passage in question, where I have dealt in greater depth with some of the issues involved. I am conscious that there is a very real difference in style between the study and the sermon. I believe that preachers for the sake of their own integrity must wrestle with the text of scripture, ensuring they have really understood what the writer was seeking to say in the first instance. However, accuracy in exegesis is not enough: what counts is understanding on the part of the hearers. This is why, my sermons tend to be 'simple' rather than 'learned', for communication is the preacher's ultimate challenge.

As will be apparent, I have not sought to offer a series of ready-made sermons. That is an impossibility, for every one of

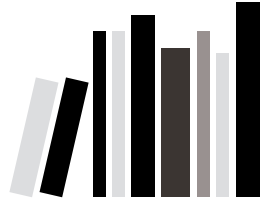
these sermons was written with a person in mind. However, what these sermons do offer is a series of approaches which readers are welcome to use and develop within their own context.

Notes to Text

1. Paul Sheppy, *In Sure and Certain Hope: Liturgies, Prayers and Readings for Funerals and Memorials*. Norfolk: Canterbury Press, 2003, 4.
2. *The Alternative Service Book 1980: Services Authorized for use in the Church of England in Conjunction with The Book of Common Prayer*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 313.
3. *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England – Pastoral Services*. London: Church House, 2000, 263.
4. See, for instance, Ernest E. Payne & Stephen F. Winward, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship*. Baptist Union of GB & Ireland, 4th edn, 1967, 204: 'If desired an address may be given'
5. Christopher Ellis & Myra Blyth, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns & Prayers for the Community of Disciples*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005, 232.
6. Ellis & Blyth, *Gathering for Worship*, 228, who entitle the section on funerals with the words 'Confronting Death. Celebrating Resurrection'
7. Jenny Hockey, *Making the Most of a Funeral*. London: Cruse Bereavement Care, 1992, quoted by David Saville, *The Funeral Service: A Guide*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 76.
8. See Frank Pagden, *Laughter and Tears: Forty-Eight Addresses for Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals*. Crowborough: Monarch, 1995.

reviews

edited by Michael Peat



Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers

By Dane Ortlund

Crossway, 2020

Reviewer: Michael Bochenski

It takes a special writer these days to attract some of us back to the many thousands of pages of Puritan writings readily available online or in print. A generation ago Peter Lewis' *The Genius of Puritanism* achieved that. This century that honour falls deservedly to Dane Ortlund who has sifted through many a Puritan tome to produce a truly wonderful book. One that has ministered to me, and judging by the many testimonials in print or online already, to thousands more. Among them is Mike Pilavachi who says quite simply that this is the best book he's ever read. Linked to *Gentle and Lowly*, are several now familiar resources: a journal, a study guide, a podcast, and a series of YouTube videos. Christian commercialism? Perhaps, but if any Christian book warrants such treatment it is this one.

Ortlund writes, he informs us, for those who suspect that '...God's patience with us is wearing thin...who know God loves us but suspect we have deeply disappointed him...who have told others of the love of Christ yet wonder if—as for us—he harbours mild resentment.' Twenty-three brief chapters form the book. A scripture verse, always apt quotations from Puritan writings, and

years of pastoral ministry combine to create a truly spiritual experience of *lectio divina*. Among Ortlund's sources are 12 volumes of Thomas Goodwin (especially his *The Heart of Christ*), seven volumes of Richard Sibbes, and 25 volumes of John Owen. Also mined is that vast treasury of John Bunyan's writings beyond *Pilgrim's Progress*, the sermons and writings of Jonathan Edwards, and—of course—Calvin's *Institutes*. It all works—and how!

'It is impossible,' Ortlund insists, 'for the affectionate heart of Christ to be over celebrated, made too much of, exaggerated.' The concepts of Christ as intercessor, brother, advocate and as friend all came alive for me when reading, in fresh and indeed delightful ways. Ortlund's skilful use of the Bible and of his own spiritual reading come powerfully to life as he explores such truths. Examples of this are the interesting parallels he notes between Jesus passing by the struggling disciples on Lake Galilee (Mark 6) and the account of God's revelation to Moses in Exodus 33-4. At times reading this book, for me, was like hearing the Lord speak personally through a gifted preacher or in an uplifting quiet time. 'Christ is love covered in flesh' (Goodwin), we are reminded: 'In him we can see heaven's eternal heart walking around on two legs in time and space.'

Ortlund is then a writer soaked in the writings of the Puritans—as, for example, was the 'prince of preachers' C. H.

Spurgeon in the 19th century, and (another outstanding preacher) in the 20th century, Martin Lloyd Jones. He clearly writes from the context of mature reflection on pastoral experience—in his case from ministry at Naperville Presbyterian Church, Illinois. We should beware imposing our own irritability, judgmentalism, criticisms of ourselves and others on to God, Orlund warns: 'Men are wont to judge and measure God from themselves; for their hearts are moved by angry passions, and are very difficult to be appeased...but the Lord shows he is far from resembling men' (Calvin). Rather our understandings of God need to be corrected by the realisation that 'Gentle lowliness is indeed where God loves to dwell. It is what he does. It is who he is.' Hear, for example, his preacher's voice in this extract: 'How does he feel about you? His saving of us is not cool and calculating. It is a matter of yearning—not yearning for the Facebook you, the you that you project to everyone around you. Not the you that you wish you were. Yearning for the real you. The you underneath everything you present to others.'

Bmj readers will by now have realised that I really rate this book! It has proved to be an attractive, accessible, good read. I read 2-3 wonderful chapters at a time and found them therapeutic—a tonic for a sometimes weary soul. Here is a further example of why: 'For God to de-resurrect you, to bring his rich mercy to an end Jesus Christ himself would have to be sucked down out of heaven and put back in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. You're that safe!' The author's own experiential relationship to the God of love and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ undergirds this (both) original and outstanding book.

In Praise of Dissent: Nonconformity in a Time of Covid

by Ian Stackhouse

Amazon, 2021

Reviewer: Bob Little

Hastily written—not least because the Covid 19 pandemic hasn't yet run its course—this slim book is unusual in that its appendix sets its context. This contains Ian Stackhouse's article, published in the *Baptist Times* in January 2021, expressing reservations over the Government's lockdown restrictions, particularly as they applied to church worship and fellowship.

Rather than being a grumpy old man's anti-regulation polemic, the article discusses 'doing church' in the pandemic and post-pandemic eras, stressing the benefits of physically gathering for worship—something which, along with 'communal singing', the 2020 lockdown prohibited. That said, there are signs of a potential rant coming, with phrases in the book's preface such as, 'I am not a scientist... but I know enough to know..'

Perplexed at the British public's meek acquiescence to the Government's lockdown restrictions of March 2020 and stressing Baptists' dissenting heritage, Stackhouse writes, 'To trade freedom for safety; to allow the State to determine when we meet; to not push back for the sake of worship, is...to accept that Christian faith is just a private affair, nothing more than a leisure activity.'

He attempts the difficult and dangerous comparison of this acceptance with acquiescence to totalitarianism in 1930s Germany and Italy, before examining other issues which, he claims, the church is accepting without dissent. These include political correctness, the rise in the media's

influence and the effects of insidious, intolerant, illiberalism masquerading as fashion. He also discusses the established church's antipathy towards such dissenters as Baptists. Underlying these issues, Stackhouse asks when—and how—the church should show dissent for unjust, unhelpful laws.

At times, Stackhouse's passions get the better of his reasoning. His arguments might be strengthened by citing research, and tighter editing could improve the book's readability. All these can be excused because of the haste with which the book was produced – to remain topical. Its value lies in the questions it raises that warrant proper debate – at both strategic and tactical levels - in the light of informed political and scientific facts and figures.

***The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So:
Why You Don't Have to Submit
to Domestic Abuse and Coercive
Control***

by Helen Paynter

Bible Reading Fellowship, 2020

Reviewer: Tim Fergusson

This is a book it would be wise to keep on the pastoral bookshelf. Perhaps two copies, as it is written to be given away.

Helen is well known to many of us as a tutor at Bristol Baptist College, the director of the college's Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, and maybe also for her lockdown undertaking of recording a 15-minute summary of every book in the Bible. (The full suite of videos is available on the BUGB YouTube channel.) She draws on this sweep of the biblical narrative in this book as she seeks to dismantle those interpretations of the Bible which have worked to maintain abusive relationships.

She says that the church ought to be a haven for the abused, but has often made matters worse and used the Bible to do so.

The book is deliberately not scholarly, however much scholarship might lie behind it. It is written more for the church member than minister. But it is a great source of accessible and rational argument for arming ministers who want to preach on the subject of domestic abuse or have to pastor those affected by it. It would be a good book to pass on to anyone grappling with inherited teaching that demands the abused forgive and forgive again, or that women are forever destined to be subordinate or silent. (The book does not deny that men also are abused but that is not its focus as the Bible is never used to justify the abuse of men by women.)

In the introduction, Helen speaks directly to women who are being subjected to domestic abuse or coercive control by saying, 'The Bible is on *your* side.' The first half of the book makes the case for why this is so. It tackles the tricky texts around the submission of wives to husbands, or the prohibition on divorce, and examines interpretations of biblical women that idealise them as mild and acquiescent. There is an excellent chapter on what forgiveness is and is not, that draws on Miroslav Volf's writing. Many ministers may be familiar with the arguments, but anything that can be put in the hands of others that supports the message we wish to communicate in our preaching or pastoral work is to be welcomed. Goodness knows, those subjected to abuse and coercive control hear the opposing arguments frequently enough.

In the book's second half, Helen moves away from texts to do with gender or

marriage roles to explore the tendency of God always to take the side of the oppressed. A chapter on Jesus places him empathetically alongside the sufferer of abuse and suggests he is the 'non-toxic' man who consistently honoured women. She affirms that the abused are, contrary to what they have been told, of immense value, and reassures her readers that despite all attempts—even and especially by the church—to minimise or cover up abuse, God sees, and that truth will out.

She finishes with a brief address aimed at each of three types of reader: to those caught in abuse; to church leaders; and, boldly and powerfully, to the perpetrators of abuse.

The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So is not complex to read or understand. It is accessible and persuasive and the type of book I will keep to then lend or give away. I can think of several pastoral occasions in my ministry when it would have been helpful to have had it to hand.

The Humble Church: Becoming the Body of Christ

by Martyn Percy

Canterbury Press, 2021

Reviewer: Robert Draycott

'The question is not, "how can we get more people into church?"' This quote could be a litmus test for discouraging potential readers, for surely that is our very *raison d'être*; it is in our DNA. Another reason for not reading this book is that it is very Anglican. But that is about it (for me at least) in terms of not reading this book by Martyn Percy.

Let us look at what he thinks the real question is: '*how can we get more people from church to love and serve the world*

as Christ would have us do?' The author questions the assumptions about growth, referring to Karl Barth's observation that the growth of the church is not to be thought of in extensive terms but those that are intensive. The parable of the sower is referenced: '*What kind of growth can you expect from the ground and conditions you work with?*' Emphasis on numerical growth can be demoralising for some. But—we may protest—targets are needed. '*If you aim at nothing!..courage, vision, objectives, and some strategy; those were not in short supply..*' (for the charge of the Light Brigade).

The book is divided into three sections, *Culture and Change; Challenge and Church; Christ and Christianity*. It is written against the backdrop of Covid and lockdown. The theme running through, underpinning it all, is that of humility which is something we do, or live out. Here is a quote from the end of the first section: '*Love, truth, attentiveness, and humility all need to flourish in our world. We are the vessels for this.*'

The middle section is very Anglican focused, for example with the chapter entitled, *Abuse, Authority, and Authenticity*. Yet that provides those from other denominations with the opportunity to apply the insights to their own situation. For example, think around this: '*we need to know that our bishops affirm the ministry of all their clergy-irrespective of their gender.*' All we have to do is substitute '*churches*' for '*bishops*'.

The opening chapter of the third section is entitled, *Us and Them*. '*That may be one of the defining divisions of our age.*' This chapter provides an opportunity to refer to another strength of the author's approach as he intersperses various pieces of

poetry throughout. Here is one snippet, from Steve Lodewyke: 'I know otherness. It's who I am. But it's not what I want to be.' In this chapter he considers the Canaanite. Having recently preached on this passage I read this with great interest. Re-reading it now I remain both intrigued and enlightened by Martyn Percy's careful analysis leading him to remark that Jesus is for something richer than the either-or of including or excluding, namely 'incorporation.'

I could go on with this recommendation but this has been intended to give something of the flavour of a very rich read.

There is Hope: Preaching at Funerals—an Introduction

By Paul Beasley-Murray

IVP, 2021

Reviewer: Phil Winn

I had only been a student minister for a few days when was asked to take my first funeral, my college course had hardly begun. Fortunately the pastor of a nearby Baptist church helpfully talked me through the basics and took me along to a funeral he was taking that week. A book on how to preach at funerals, with hints on funeral arrangements and how to treat the bereaved would have been extremely helpful; only now, after I have retired, has such a book been produced.

While many funerals major on celebrating the achievements of the deceased, Paul Beasley-Murray encourages preachers to declare the hope of resurrection life that is ours in Christ. Drawing on his considerable pastoral experience he demonstrates how this can be done.

I suspect that many preachers have a handful of passages which they use in funerals. In *There is Hope*, Paul Beasley-Murray looks at 20 passages, from all parts of the Bible, on which he has preached at funerals. There is a study on each passage, particularly highlighting an aspect of Christian hope, followed by a sermon. Beasley-Murray sets a good example to preachers, in any setting, demonstrating how to understand what the text is saying before applying it, in an accessible way, to the current situation.

Most of the of the sermons are from funerals of people Beasley-Murray knew well (including his own mother); there are a couple of people he did not know personally, but who had some Christian faith. The situations include sudden and expected deaths, the suicide of a young man and a stillbirth. The sermons are not meant to be copied, but provide inspiration to use these passages in one's own funeral preparation.

Perhaps the most difficult funerals to do well, and with integrity, are those of non-churchgoers. Baptist ministers may be asked to conduct the funeral of someone who had, at most, a tenuous connection with the church or one of its organisations. As I read though *There is Hope* I was eager to find examples of sermons preached in such a context; at this point however, the book takes a different turn.

The final chapter, *Hope for All?* begins with a theological reflection on the fate of the unbeliever. While taking a conservative stance and being careful to hold out the certainty of heaven only to the believer, the author emphasises the mercy of God and the need for pastoral sensitivity. Rather than a study of a suitable study

and an example sermon, Beasley-Murray gives suggestions for the structure of a suitable service, examples of passages to be read and ideas for inclusion in the sermon. I was disappointed not to have one complete sermon section.

There are four useful appendices. Two are on particularly difficult situations; a suggested funeral for a baby who died in the womb and a reflection on the suicide of a young man. The other two would be more generally applicable; a personal reflection on bereavement and one on practicalities following a death, which provides a helpful checklist.

For someone at the start of their ministry this book would be an invaluable resource; those who have been in ministry longer will also find many stimulating ideas here.

Can you review?

Contact **Mike Peat**
on mike.peat@bristol.ac.uk
with your details and the areas
you are interested in.

bmj Essay Prize 2022

The *bmj* invites entries for our Essay Prize from those serving in, or in formation for, the leadership and ministry of Baptist churches or in other contexts. We would like an essay of 2500 words on a topic and title of the entrant's choice that fits into one of the following categories:

Baptist History and Principles, Biblical Studies, Theology or Practical Theology

We are looking for clear writing and argument, and preferably a creative engagement with our Baptist life. The prize will be **£250.00** and the winning essay (and any highly commended contributions) will be published in *bmj*.

We particularly encourage entries from those in the early years of their (Baptist) ministries, which includes MiTs and those who are not in accredited or recognised leadership roles.

Closing date: 31 March 2022

Entries should be submitted **electronically, double spaced and fully referenced, using endnotes not footnotes**, to the editor at revsal96@aol.com, including details of your name, address, church, role, and stage of ministry.

Judges will be drawn from the Editorial Board of *bmj* and experienced academic Baptist colleagues. We reserve the right not to award a prize if the entries are unsuitable, of an inadequate standard for *bmj*, or do not meet the criteria.

Please share this competition with colleagues to whom it might be of interest.

Contact the editor if you have any queries.



the baptist ministers'
journal

January 2022 volume 353



**The Baptist Ministers' Fellowship
Committee**

Chair:

Tim Edworthy, 22 Catchpin Street, Buckingham MK18 7RR
(07710 026495); wellstreetminister@gmail.com

Secretary:

Mike Peat, Multifaith Chaplaincy Centre, The Grange,
1 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1AU

Treasurer:

Ron Day, 14 Gretton Street, Oakham, Rutland, LE15 7UU
(07883 850840); ronald.e.day@outlook.com

Membership: Please contact Treasurer

Editor:

Sally Nelson, 4 Station View, Church Fenton, Tadcaster,
North Yorks LS24 9QY; revsal96@aol.com

Co-opted members:

Carol Murray, 16 Anxey Way, Haddenham, Bucks HP17 8DJ

Andy Goodliff, 63 Leamington Road, Southend-on-Sea,
Essex SS1 2SW

Leigh Greenwood, 68 Gartree Road, Leicester, LE2 2FW

Peterson Anand, 176 Nacton Road, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP3 9JN