



Knowing What we Believe

A paper presented to BUGB Council in November 2009 exploring issues of Baptist identity and theological authority.

**The Baptist Union of Great Britain
Faith and Unity Executive**

**KNOWING WHAT WE BELIEVE
Theological Authority amongst Baptists**

Identity

It is not easy to identify the marks of a Baptist community. Whereas certain Christian traditions gain coherence from a shared pattern of worship, or a clear ecclesial structure, or lengthy creedal statements, it is difficult to recognise any such unifying factor for Baptists. Our life, worship and witness are almost endlessly varied. We are indeed a 'Union' of churches – and perhaps the most easily identifiable characteristic of being a Baptist community is that none of us are the same!

Yet identity matters, not least as it relates to the issue of authority. To be able to identify what it means to be Baptist is to know what beliefs have authority within and amongst Baptist communities. It is to understand how Baptist life is ordered, and what distinctive contribution Baptist communities are called to make to God's mission in the world.

There are certain convictions that are generally thought to belong to Baptists, and that together might begin to provide a distinctive identity. These could be said to include a commitment to the practice of believers' baptism, recognition of the significance of the Church Meeting in the life of the gathered community, the importance of religious freedom, and living out a faith that is generally described as 'evangelical'. But when we start to examine how such Baptist distinctives are lived and expressed within the life of particular communities, it is far less easy to see exactly how they provide a basis for shared identity. For example, churches believe very different things about the meaning of believers' baptism and practice it in varying circumstances, thus making it very hard to offer a clear, authoritative account of what Baptists would want to say about something that is often thought of as central to our life together.

An alternative approach might be to seek Baptist identity in a shared story from the past that shapes present life and experience. Certainly there are ideas and beliefs that have been profoundly influenced by Baptist history and tradition, shaping attitudes and actions on such matters as attitudes to those who hold political power, the right to dissent, and the centrality of the rule of Christ. But, again, it is less easy to see how these coalesce into any coherent account of who Baptists are and what Baptists believe. Many Baptist communities would probably struggle to articulate the story of their past, and might easily question its relevance in determining what principles have authority for us in today's society. For example, it is hard to imagine the debate over education provision that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century finding much resonance within Baptist churches today.

Declaration of Principle

One obvious place we might go to discover what it is that defines a Baptist community is the basis of our Union – the Declaration of Principle. This states:

1. *That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters relating 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.*
2. *That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day.'*
3. *That it is the duty of every disciple to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.*

Here is one way of declaring who Baptists are, what we believe, and what has authority amongst us. First drawn up in 1883, enlarged in 1904, and slightly amended in 1938, this text succeeded in bringing together two streams of Baptist life – the Particular and the General – and allowed the structural organisation of the Union to develop, providing it with the necessary legitimacy and authority.

It is the first of the three paragraphs that speaks very directly to the issue of theological authority, and three sources of this authority are identified. First, there is Christ who has supreme and final authority. It is in relationship to a person that Baptists discover what to believe and how to act. Second, there is Scripture that reveals Christ. The testimony it contains is to the new reality revealed by God in Christ. Third, there is the local church gathered together. Baptists have freedom to seek the mind of Christ in community. These three authorities, in that order, attempt to offer a way of understanding Baptist identity. This is how life within a Christian community is to be recognised as authentically Baptist.

Living with Tension

The difficulty is that the Declaration of Principle reveals an inherent tension within Baptist understandings of the church that has arguably become increasingly evident in the life of the Union over recent years. It is this tension that makes it very hard to state what Baptists believe and how Baptists are to know what they believe.

On the one hand, Baptist communities want to be clear that together they stand for something. Being Baptist does have meaning, whether it is seen in the authority accorded to the person of Christ or in the practice of believers' baptism. There are, it is proposed, beliefs that matter to all Baptists and provide a measure of their life and practice.

On the other hand, Baptist communities want to retain a freedom to stand separately with liberty to seek the mind of Christ. Being Baptist has its roots within the local church, each being governed by Christ, such that no authority can be imposed upon it from wider church bodies. The local congregation is the Body of Christ and so determines life and practice.

It is this inherent tension that is played out in the struggle for identity. It seems as if there ought to be convictions that are held in common by all Baptists, and a shared story that all can recognise and own. Yet when these are examined carefully what emerges is a far more diffuse picture, reflecting the liberty that each church has to interpret and administer Christ's laws. The result is that it is hard to know what we believe and where theological authority lies.

This tension is played out in the life of Associations, Council and Assembly. These are the places that offer Baptists the opportunity to come together to discern the mind of Christ and to make decisions that have authority. They gather together the local churches in order that a common voice might be found. So it is at such gatherings that significant Baptist leadership appointments are made, churches are or are not admitted into the Union on the basis of their commitment to being Baptist, Baptist ministry is recognised, and a range of steps are taken to organise and order Baptist life and witness.

Yet within all this it is noticeable how difficult Baptists often find it to debate theologically, to speak authoritatively, and so to know what we believe. There is a reluctance to be anything much more than pragmatic.

This has had significant advantages. It does enable the Union to retain its ethos as a place where Baptists are able to walk together amidst difference and diversity, and there has been an historic reluctance to use – for example – creeds and confessions as a way of determining who should or should not be part of the community. But perhaps today more than in the past, this proper concern for diversity and liberty is making it very hard to know and determine what Baptists believe. The general loss of denominational identity and loyalty has removed some of the underlying assumptions that would have existed in the past.

Two Examples

Two examples may serve to illustrate the difficulties and dilemmas that we face as Baptists.

a) The Church Meeting

If there is any clear understanding of Baptist identity, then it might be thought that the presence of a Church Meeting in the life of the believing community is fundamental. This is where the liberty under the guidance of God's Spirit to determine the mind of Christ is to be found. Certainly those who worked on the new Approved Governing Document to facilitate charity registration were acutely aware of the need to protect the authority of the Church Meeting, and managed to reserve to it key

matters in church life – control of the membership list, significant property matters, appointment of ministers, and the appointment and removal of trustees.

As a result of this piece of work, however, it has become evident that there are churches within the Union who order things very differently, reserving for the church leadership many of the key matters listed above. The result is that the Church Meeting has become no more than an opportunity to inform the membership of decisions made by others.

What should be done? The churches concerned might give good organisational reasons for their way of doing things, and could well argue that the presence of a Church Meeting does not automatically mean an absence of authoritarian leadership. More significantly, they might say that they have liberty to discern Christ's particular calling for them, under the terms of the Declaration of Principle.

b) Women in Ministry

For almost a century, Baptists has recognised and affirmed the calling of women to ministry. They are present on the accredited list of ministers, serve as Regional Ministers, and are involved in the formation of future ministers within Baptist colleges. There is no area of Union life where women are prevented from serving.

Yet statistical evidence, the expressed views of some within Baptist communities, and conversations with women in ministry all reveal that there is clear resistance by some within the Union to women being called and affirmed in ministry. There are congregations that continue to refuse to consider the appointment of a woman minister under any circumstances.

What should be done? The churches concerned might have those within their membership that express the kind of unreflective gender discrimination that too often scars the life of our society as well as that of the church, but it is just as likely that theological justifications will be given for the position adopted. And they will state that, under the terms of the Declaration of Principle, the church has liberty to interpret the laws of Christ even if that means they are at odds with the generally held views that guide the life of the Union.

What does it mean to be Baptist? What is it that Baptists believe? And where does theological authority lie? Both these examples lay open some of the difficulties faced in trying to answer those questions. It is not clear how the authority and liberty of a local congregation should interact with wider attempts to discern what distinctive convictions should mark out Baptists.

Covenanted Community

One of the key ways in which Baptists have sought to respond to questions of identity and authority is by affirming the importance of covenant. This is seen as having two dimensions – a vertical covenant relationship between the Christian community and God, and a horizontal covenant relationship between the members of that community. It expresses the profound belief that just as no individual Christian lives out their faith in isolation, so no Christian community should do so either. Baptists belong together, in relationships of interdependence, with responsibilities to walk together and watch over one another.

Association life, together with meetings of Council and Assembly, are the ways in which this is expressed. This is where Baptists are called to the adventure of faith, journeying with one another in a continuing discovery of what to believe and how to live. At its best, this covenant theology has enabled Baptists to listen carefully to the voices of those who are so often at the margins, and to allow their voice to shape and influence discernment processes. It has enabled the development of checks and balances that prevent authoritarian leadership, and allow wide participation and freedom in seeking the mind of Christ.

But though covenant commitment is vital to understanding how Baptists are to know what they believe, it is nevertheless an elusive way of determining authority. Covenant theology will place upon a particular Baptist community an obligation to listen; it will encourage wider processes of discernment; it calls for an openness that is prepared to learn in the search to be faithful to the rule of Christ. But when all that has happened, and a community rejects the ethos of the Church Meeting or refuses to recognise the full validity of women's ministry, what is to be said about Baptist identity? How are we to understand where theological authority lies?

Finding a Way Forward

In seeking to state clearly and with conviction who we are as Baptists, we will want to take care over the use of the word 'authority'. As a Union of Churches, Associations and Colleges, any attempt by a committee or council to impose theological convictions is likely to be met with justifiable resistance. Authoritarianism has no place. That which has authority must always be the result of a process of shared discernment, and there must be a constant reaffirmation that we all remain always under the rule of Christ.

Further, the nature of theological authority amongst Baptists will not be to list a series of doctrines that demand adherence, and it cannot be about the keeping and making of rules that demand obedience. Rather, it is about discerning the mind of Christ and so discovering what it means to be gospel people. Inevitably, this will result in blurred boundaries that allow different interpretations and understandings to live side by side, but this needs to be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. We accept with joy the freedom we have in Christ.

As Baptists, we do need to take seriously the task of covenant listening as vital to discerning that which has theological authority. This is not just about local churches hearing what is said through the shared life of Associations, Council and Assembly. It is also about the structures of the Union listening carefully to the voices that come from the churches, enabling them to shape the decisions that are made.

Yet covenant relationships are also about mutual accountability. The liberty possessed by the local church cannot exempt it from the challenge of sustaining and nurturing creative relationships with the Association and the wider Union, and this is particularly necessary when difficulties are encountered and different convictions are being expressed.

This leads in the direction of certain key conclusions to guide our way forward:

- Our primary decision-making body is Council, though Assembly plays a key role in our life together and our Trustees have particular legal responsibilities. Thus, we believe that Council needs – with the help of the Faith and Unity Executive – to play a key role in helping recover a confidence to debate, discern and agree statements of conviction and belief that have authority amongst us. This is part of our covenant responsibility to discern the mind of Christ, and is a way in which we give meaning to our identity as Baptists.
- The liberty of the individual church is a central principle, but this liberty cannot prevent Council giving voice to convictions that should shape and determine our life together as Baptists. The local church has a freedom of reception.
- It is not normally the role of Council to exercise the kind of authority that disciplines or excludes churches who dissent. Indeed, authority involves a shared listening, rooted in trust, integrity, transparency and mutual commitment. Thus, a local church may always choose not to receive that which has been agreed in the wider bodies of the Union. But this may then have the consequence of the church excluding itself from covenant relationships. A church needs to be aware of the convictions that unite Baptists and the possible consequences of putting itself outside the processes of discernment that guide our life together.

We need to have the courage and take the risk of declaring what it is that Baptists believe. Perhaps such declarations can only ever be provisional, and as such they will express our inherent vulnerability. They will also continually affirm the diversity and freedom that enriches Baptist life. But they will nevertheless enable us to know something of who we are as God's people, and so to offer a distinctive witness to God's truth and grace.

With this in mind, the Faith and Unity Executive will seek to begin to gather together those documents that have authority amongst us, that guide our life together, and that give expression to our identity as Baptists. This work will be brought to Council with the aim of determining what further actions need to be taken.

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