

The Courage to be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality

Our full statement, 'The Courage to be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality', is a call to Baptist churches to face our present disagreements over same-sex marriage by being faithful to a Baptist way of being church.

Baptists believe that each local church must discern Christ's call for itself. Baptists also believe that local churches have a duty to associate together, and should support each other in this work of discerning Christ's call. This involves listening to one another when we differ.

We argue that both these points are missional, rightly understood. Each local church is seeking to make Christ known in a particular context, and must discern what Christ is calling it to do in that context. At the same time, Christian unity is, according to our Lord Jesus, necessary for the world to believe (Jn. 17:23).

This Baptist way of being church allows us to maintain unity even when we disagree about certain issues. We believe this is a gift of God, allowing us to witness to our true unity in Christ even when we disagree about serious matters.

We believe (following our Declaration of Principle) that the way a church discerns Christ's call is by meeting together to interpret Scripture. On certain subjects we do not yet all read Scripture in the same way, and so we do disagree.

One of the serious matters we currently disagree about is whether Christian marriage is always between a man and a woman, or whether a same-sex marriage might be authentically Christian. The authors of this statement disagree about this amongst themselves, whilst agreeing that our churches must take seriously their welcome of those who identify as LGBT+.

We believe, however, that our churches will do best by dealing with this disagreement the way we deal with others: refusing to let it divide us, but continuing to talk and pray and love.

We do not pretend this will be easy for anyone. We do believe God calls us, as Baptist Christians, to do this—and so we believe it is the best place we can possibly be.

We ask Baptist churches to have the courage to be Baptist.

The Revd Beth Allison-Glenny
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The Revd Dr Ruth Gouldbourne
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The Revd David Kerrigan
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1. Preamble

Every Western denomination is struggling with ethical questions about human sexuality. The authors of this statement do not pretend to have the solution to those questions; indeed, we disagree amongst ourselves on them. We do agree that Baptist churches, associations, and unions will respond best by having the courage to be faithful to who we are called to be: faithfully Christian and faithfully Baptist. Such faithfulness has often served us well in other debates in the past,¹ and will, we trust, serve us equally well when different disagreements arise in the future.

We see in the very fact that we are struggling with questions that seem intractable an opportunity, a call, even perhaps a gift from God. Those of us in the Baptist movement in the West today have the chance to rediscover the ways of walking together under the rule of Christ² that made us, as Baptists, what we are. We have been given the possibility—and the responsibility—of living out the Baptist vision before the world and before the other churches. We need to grasp this opportunity, and show that we are Christians by our love for one another.

The authors of this statement believe that in our Baptist way of being church, we have something to declare, a vision of how God's people and God's churches can be together that is truly gospel-shaped, that models unity in disagreement in a world that struggles to believe that unity can exist without uniformity. We dare to hope that living differently could be a powerful witness to the truth of the gospel.

In the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain we find an expression of what God calls us to be and to do. All that follows in this statement is an outworking of that calling. We will navigate our current disagreements well if we can only dare to be faithful to God's call to us as Baptist Christians expressed in the DoP.

What follows is not intended as criticism. Rather, it is a summons—we believe possibly a prophetic summons—to face our disagreements and divisions not with fear, or with unbaptist attempts to assert control, or by deferring to expertise or authority, but in love, in fellowship, in association, in union, seeking together to know the mind of Christ, to walk together and watch over each other³ even where we disagree, until such time as the Lord shall give us more light and truth.⁴

In the book of Acts we read of a crisis engulfing the infant church in Jerusalem: issues of poverty and justice and race coalesced into a problem that, humanly speaking, could have destroyed the body of Christ almost before it had begun. The apostles responded by refusing to allow a crisis to divert them from their proper calling, but also by acting swiftly.

¹ Astute readers will pick up the many allusions in this text to events within our Baptist history. This is more than a literary flourish, rather it is an attempt to place today's events in the context of a Baptist people who have grappled with controversy before and made us the people we are today.

² This phrase echoes language used in the 1644/6 London Confession article XLVII, which in turn borrows the language from the 1596 (Separatist) *True Confession*, article 38.

³ This is a common description of the shared responsibility of church members in Baptist history.

⁴ Seventeenth-century Baptist confessions often ended, or ended their preface, with this phrase.

The result was renewal and revival out of crisis and response, so that ‘the word of God spread. The number of disciples ... increased rapidly.’ (Acts 6:7)

We challenge all Baptists to consider whether by responding to our present troubles in courageous faithfulness rather than fear, distrust, or contempt, we too might see the word of God spread and the number of disciples increase rapidly. In expecting great things of God, we can surely attempt great things for God.⁵

2. Affirmations and Consequences

On the church: theological affirmations

1. The church belongs to the triune God. Born again of water and the Holy Spirit, we are called together by the Father to become one with Christ.
2. Christ is the foundation of the church, its head and shepherd. Only in Christ Jesus can the church hold together (Eph. 2:21). In Christ Jesus, despite all our failure and faithlessness, the church does hold together.
3. The church is given life by the Holy Spirit, who also gives gifts to every member of the church, so that through each one of us the church may be built up, and we may all grow to be mature in Christ.
4. The church is sent into all the world to proclaim the good news and to work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God.
5. Because the church belongs to God, the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

On the unity of the church: theological affirmations

1. The church is one because Christ has one body and one bride; there is one Spirit who gives us new life, one hope to which we are called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.
2. The unity of the church, then, is not based on shared agreement on disputed issues. Disagreement is a sadness and perhaps a scandal, but it is not a breach of unity.
3. This true unity of the church is a rebuke to our visible divisions and a summons to travel beyond them.
4. In prayer to the Father, Jesus asserted that our unity is the necessary basis of successful evangelism (Jn 17:23).

On the unity of the church: practical consequences

1. Disagreement, particularly on practical issues, can lead to visible disunity; people who are committed to doing things differently will often end up doing things separately.
2. Our congregationalist ecclesiology allows us to maintain our union and association, and so our visible unity, even in the face of such practical disagreements. This is a strength and a treasure in our tradition; one that we believe is of God, and that is a prophetic witness of the love of Christ that breaks down every dividing wall.

⁵ The title of the sermon William Carey preached at the founding of (what is now) BMS World Mission was ‘Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!’

3. If it is 'the duty of every disciple to ... take part in the evangelisation of the world'⁶, then it is the duty of every disciple to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:3). World evangelisation depends, in part at least, on our visible unity.
4. Maintaining visible and organisational unity even in the face of disagreement, then, is the Baptist way, a response to Christ's call, and necessary for mission.

On local churches: theological affirmations

1. God gathers disciples into churches, and makes covenant with us in churches. The call to grow in Christ is a call to grow together.
2. Each local congregation is gathered by God, has Christ as its head, and receives the gifts of the Spirit. Because of this, each local congregation is complete in itself.
3. Each local congregation is called to be in a particular mission context. It is called to so proclaim the gospel that it may be heard in the language of that place, and to so know its context so that it may work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God in that place.
4. The God-given liberty of each local congregation to interpret Christ's laws⁷ is thus a missional imperative. We must always ask and keep on asking what must be said and done to make the gospel understandable and credible in the particular place where God has called us to serve.

On local churches: practical consequences

1. The life of every local congregation is a contextual response to God's call to worship and mission, inexplicable apart from a knowledge of both the gospel and the particular context in which it is called to live and share the gospel.
2. There is thus a proper respect to be given to the particular decisions of every local congregation; they should not be disparaged or challenged without good reason.
3. Of course, local congregations can and do misunderstand or only partially understand their context, and can and do mishear the call of God; there is a proper provisionality and humility to all our decisions. We 'walk together in the ways of God, known or to be made known'.⁸
4. This provisionality should never, however, be an excuse for inaction. God calls us to follow boldly, to be energetic in the mission of Christ in the best ways that we can discern.

On churches associating together: theological affirmations

1. Each local congregation is called to walk together in love and fellowship with every other congregation which it can recognise as a true church of Christ.

⁶ Clause 3 of the BUGB Declaration of Principle.

⁷ Clause 1 of the BUGB Declaration of Principle.

⁸ A common phrase in Baptist church covenants and association agreements.

2. Churches have the same responsibility towards each other in association as Christians do in the local church.⁹
3. It is therefore a Christian duty for churches to form structures—associations, networks, and unions—to express, facilitate, and further their relationships.
4. Associations, networks, and unions can have no formal authority over a local church; that belongs to Christ alone. This is a core Baptist conviction.

On churches associating together: practical consequences

1. The responsibility of associating is first of all a responsibility to know and to be known. The prayer, counsel, support, and rebuke that are the proper modes of associational life can only adequately be offered if lives are shared.
2. Association and Union life, then, should primarily be a facilitated practice of talking together in trust and love, with missional purpose. Local churches must know and love one another.
3. Associations and Unions can never take authority over a local church, but may and should offer support, challenge, and counsel to local churches as they develop their own response to Christ's call in their context.
4. Equally, the local church should welcome and take seriously the wisdom and counsel offered by Associations and Unions in its own deliberations.
5. Baptists have never been independents. The instinct to associate runs remarkably deep in our tradition and is very rarely refused, even when there has been hot dispute about the appropriate forms of association. It is not an authentically Baptist option to refuse to associate.

On the authority of Scripture: theological affirmations

1. Christ's ways are made known to us in God-breathed Scripture, which is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.' (2Tim. 3:16)
2. 'Each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [Christ's] laws.'¹⁰ Therefore, the primary context for hearing and understanding Scripture is the gathered local church.
3. The task of Biblical interpretation is unfinished, and will remain unfinished until the Lord's return. 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.'¹¹

On the authority of Scripture: practical consequences

1. That the task of Biblical interpretation is unfinished does not mean that the church cannot reach a settled place on certain issues: the affirmation of Christ's deity, or the repudiation of slavery, would be examples of settled issues.

⁹ This affirmation echoes the founding document of the Abingdon Baptist Association, from 1652: 'every church ought to manifest its care over other churches as fellow members of the same body of Christ in general do rejoice and mourne'.

¹⁰ BUGB Declaration of Principle, clause 1.

¹¹ These words are found in George Rawson's nineteenth-century hymn, 'We limit not the truth of God'. They echo a sermon preached by John Robinson as the Pilgrim Fathers departed for America on the Mayflower. Robinson had been pastor of the sister church to the one led by Smyth and Helwys, and so his words reflect the understanding that led to the birth of the Baptist movement.

2. How may we discern whether an issue is settled? Only when there are no credible arguments remaining to the contrary.
3. Groups of churches may nonetheless come to agreement that a particular issue is settled amongst them, even if still disputed in the wider church. Baptist churches unite around the claim 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',¹² for instance.
4. We British Baptists have united around a minimal statement of shared principles and so modelled living together in unity and love despite differences. Because of this we live with a measure of disagreement on the interpretation of Scripture, even on issues that we have discerned as settled amongst us. We have, for example, affirmed the call of women to the ordained ministry or allowed the remarriage of divorcees, but not sought to disassociate churches that disagree on these points.

On human sexuality: theological affirmations

1. No differently from any other aspect of our human existence, our sexuality is a good gift of God, created to be exercised in ways that glorify God.
2. No differently from any other aspect of our human existence, our sexuality is marred and distorted, tending to our destruction and the frustration of our divine calling.
3. No differently from any other aspect of our human existence, our response to the gospel call includes embracing patterns of life that discipline our sexuality, re-ordering our desires to conform us more and more to the pattern of Christ's perfect life.
4. No differently from any other aspect of our created existence, none of us can pretend to be without sin in the area of our sexuality, and there is full and free forgiveness in Christ for all our sexual failures.

On human sexuality: practical consequences

1. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...' (Rom. 3:23): we refuse any account of human sexuality that claims certain sexual desires, orientations, or relationships are unfallen or free from sin. Equally we refuse any account that judges certain sexual desires, orientations, or relationships to be peculiarly broken or sinful.
2. '...being justified freely by his grace.' (Rom. 3:24): there is no place for prejudice in our churches; God's grace welcomes all people without distinction, whatever their sexuality.
3. The peculiar contextual challenge we presently face is that questions of sexual ethics are magnified in importance on both sides of the debate. Where, at the extremes, some see a nightmare of a dangerous and perhaps devastating 'downgrade'¹³ in morality, others have a dream of 'justice springing up in the desert and freedom ringing for all God's children'.¹⁴ Both the fear and the hope grow from a desire to be more faithful to the ways of Christ as revealed in Scripture, and so both must be regarded with respect and empathy.
4. There is no qualitative difference between disagreements on sexuality and (say) the ordination of women. Any refusal to follow Christ's laws is sin, by definition. We cannot

¹² BUGB Declaration of Principle, clause 2.

¹³ Recalling the language of Charles Haddon Spurgeon in his famous 1887 article.

¹⁴ Recalling the language of Martin Luther King in his famous 'I have a dream' speech.

relativise some practices we regard as disobedience to Christ by pretending they are merely ‘matters of order’ or the like.

5. The introduction of laws permitting same-sex marriages in England, Wales, and Scotland in recent years has posed a particular challenge for our churches. Marriage is a Christian good, a way of ordering our lives according to the gospel; can same-sex marriage be so? Or does marriage, Christianly understood, depend so fundamentally on openness to procreation or on sexual difference that this is not possible? We cannot pretend that such questions are settled amongst us; rather, as a theologian of another tradition put it, we see ‘a conversation waiting to begin’.¹⁵
6. The broad unwillingness of churches in the majority world to countenance any movement on this aspect of sexual ethics places a further burden on us; we need to walk together in the ways of Christ with brothers and sisters from across the globe, taking seriously their perceptions, and asking them to take ours equally seriously.
7. Every worthwhile position on Christian sexual ethics in the contemporary West will be in some measure agonised, troubled and unsettled. We are strangers in a strange land, the pilgrim people of God, and we cannot expect to be comfortable here.

3. A call to Baptist churches

‘What, then, shall we do?’

We cannot cry ‘peace, peace’, because there is no peace. We cannot pretend the specific question of churches registering for same-sex marriages will go away; nor will broader questions of how we respond to changing societal understandings of human sexuality. Nationally, and in many local areas, the question is unavoidable now; in other local areas it will inevitably become so in the next few years. There will continue to be gay and lesbian Christians in our churches, who need to be loved and guided in practices that tend to holiness just as straight Christians do. By God’s grace, same-sex couples will continue to come to faith and will need to be disciplined well.

We could seek to reach unity by imposing uniformity, tying the body of Christ to a procrustean bed to distort and dismember it until it fits our current (and of course deficient) understanding of what it should look like. The authors of this statement believe that any such attempt would be faithless and born of fear, a denial of our shared Baptist confession of how God calls us to live together.

We could give up on our associational structures and become independents, in the belief that what divides us is greater than what unites us. But what unites us is shared faith in and commitment to the active lordship of Jesus Christ; are our disputes about sexual ethics, however weighty they may be, really greater than that? To become independents, to despair of our associational structures, would again be faithless and fearful, and a denial of our shared Baptist confession of how God calls us to live together.

¹⁵ The title of a book by Oliver O’Donovan, reflecting on the debate over sexuality in the Church of England and the wider Anglican communion.

The authors of this statement believe that the courageous and truly faithful response is to trust that the ways we believe God has called us to live together are adequate to this present crisis.

- We call for local churches to engage together much more deeply and honestly than before, so that we truly know and are known.
- We call for serious, open-ended, and respectful conversation, directed towards enriching our shared mission: this is our ‘conversation waiting to begin’.
- We call for shared trust and good faith, a commitment to believe that those churches with whom we disagree take their positions out of a desire to shape life according to the gospel, and to follow faithfully the laws of Christ disclosed in Scripture.
- We call for a willingness to allow every church to follow its own discernment of Christ’s call on its life, and a willingness on the part of every church to allow its discernment to be questioned and challenged by others.
- We call, rather simply, for Baptist churches to have the courage to be Baptist.

We do not pretend that this will be easy. It will be costly. It will take time and effort that could be given elsewhere. It will involve our churches making themselves vulnerable at deep points. It will require churches to live with tensions and disagreements that some will find close to unbearable. We believe, however, that however protracted, painful, and precarious this existence might be, it is in fact our only place of true safety and security, because it is the place where God is calling us to live.

There will be churches amongst us who believe the demands of justice for LGBT+ people are so urgent that they will wish to resist this call to conversation and co-existence; there will be other churches who believe their own contextual mission will be so compromised by any re-examination of marriage that they will also want to resist. We call both sets of churches to have patience with those churches that are not yet so certain, to walk with them and help them to know better Christ’s ways, despite the cost that comes with such patience.

There may be other churches on either side who will be uninterested in further conversation because they cannot imagine how a position other than their own could be faithful or biblical. To such we say, gently but seriously, that the limits of your—or our—imagination are not a good source of theological insight. The gospel call remains to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to discover that sometimes, often, God gives more than we can imagine. The smallness of our imaginations can never be a reason to denigrate God’s gifts.

Amongst the authors of this statement are some who believe that a properly Baptist engagement over sexual ethics will lead our churches to re-assert that male-female marriage is the only Christian way and others who believe that it will lead our churches to embrace same-sex marriage as a profoundly Christian option. We talk about these things in private, and (some of us) in very public spaces too. We do not expect to convince each other any time soon, but in maintaining our friendships, learning from each other, and discovering more of the missional contexts and biblical insights that make us advocates for our differing positions, we encourage each other to follow Christ more faithfully even as we disagree. This, we believe, is our Baptist way.

Commendations

"Were it up to me I would wish our denomination to hold fast fearlessly, publicly and with a good conscience to a traditional understanding of marriage and sexual relations. I hope it will go on doing so. However, respect for the freedom of informed (and sometimes dissenting) consciences is a high priority for any Baptist, a proven way of holding together when there are deeply-felt disagreements, and a moral strength. This statement offers a thoughtful and compassionate rationale for such an approach and as such is to be commended."

The Revd Dr Nigel G. Wright

"In this carefully argued statement seven leading Baptist theologians explore how the Baptist community can work on the difficult issue of human sexuality without breaking fellowship with one another. Drawing on our heritage of individual freedom of conscience, and the responsibility enshrined in our Declaration of Principle that under the Lordship of Christ each congregation should work out the gospel in terms appropriate to their specific context, the authors take the optimistic view that Baptists might offer an example of how Christians can work together on this and other intractable issues. As an exploration of Christian process it summons our congregations to be bold in the implementation of our convictions about open and generous companionship."

The Revd Dr Patricia Took

"I warmly welcome this timely statement, the kind of manifesto for UK Baptists which is badly needed today. It sets out the Baptist understanding of the church, both local and in association, with remarkable clarity and shows how relevant this is to current debates about human sexuality. Since its authors differ on the issue of same-sex relations, their writing models, in an extraordinarily helpful way, the love and unity that should be possible among Baptists at this critical moment in their story. Read widely, this statement could transform attitudes and strengthen Baptists to share in the mission of God."

The Revd Prof. Paul Fiddes