



# OUR BAPTIST **Roots** OF GATHERING

Is it enough to say the church is the people, not the building? Not for the earliest Baptists, writes Ruth Gouldbourne

**T**he church is the people, not the building.

How often have we said – and just what do we mean by it?

What we mean by it is pretty clear; church is not a building we all attend at a set time, but it is the living community of those who do the attending...

But is that enough of a definition? After all, there are other places we attend regularly, with the same people, sharing an intention; pupils regularly attend a school, colleagues regularly congregate (sometimes) in a workplace, fans get together in a stadium...but though they may share some characteristics, they are not churches, neither named for the building, nor in our more nuanced theological meaning.

Is it enough to say the church is the people, not the building? Does that give a full enough meaning to the term church?

For the earliest Baptists, it didn't. They were not those who having had no life of faith or regular attendance in a church building, were then converted and started to do something which meant they could say they were now 'in the church'. They were those who had been attending services, had been connected to, even central to congregations, involved in worship, prayer and seeking to live faithfully. But they concluded that although this was people, it was not church.

For more than a century before recognisably Baptist congregations were visible, there had been ongoing and heated debates about how to identify a true Church of Christ, and what

the difference was between a meeting of people, and a congregation in worship. To put it very briefly and simplistically, for generations through the medieval period, things were relatively clear. 'The Church' was sustained by and located in the authority of the properly ordained priest; the presence of the Spirit was guaranteed by the action of ordination and the activity of the priest in saying the prayers and conducting the actions that made Christ present in the sacraments.

With the change in theology, philosophy and practice that we call the Reformation, the assumptions that sustained this could no longer be taken for granted. Debates about what marked a true church were an important part of the explorations that shaped reformation theology.

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***Early Baptist congregations were formed in a time of debate as to what constituted a church***

For Luther, there were seven marks of a true church.<sup>1</sup> Calvin wrote 12 chapters in volume 4 of his 'Institutes' – and so it continues; knowing what a true church was, and on what basis it was constituted, was deeply important as all the previous convictions were questioned. And it mattered because it was a guarantee of a true gospel, and therefore of true salvation. If all the previous markers of salvation were removed, what was a believer to depend on?

It is in the context of this debate that we find Baptists emerging in the 17th century. In England the debate had involved discussion about the continuity of the episcopacy through the reformation – had apostolic succession been maintained in an unbroken continuity? For this was a mark of the continuing authority and validity of the sacraments, and therefore the presence of the true Church and of Christ within it. It had also become entwined with the ongoing discussions about the role of the monarch, and the relationship between the Church and the State. The authenticity of the Church, as the vehicle of salvation through sacraments and the preaching of the gospel, continued in 17th century England to be linked to State sanction and apostolic succession and so episcopal oversight.

But there were those who remained unconvinced, or became unconvinced through reading Scripture and through

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## *To be church therefore entailed being together... The church was them in their gathering, with the Lord among them*

conversation, that these were sufficient, or even necessary, criteria for recognising the true church. And some of these became the people we identify as the earliest Baptists.

We have the accounts therefore of people like Dorothy Hazzard, who, because of her reading of Scripture and the conversations she had with others who were exploring the same ideas, came to the conviction that her presence in the parish service (presided over by her husband) which used a government supplied prayer book, and depended on the sanction of the local bishop, was in fact to share the mark of the beast. She gradually withdrew, and began instead to meet with others of like mind, and to read, pray, discuss, invite a teacher, and eventually be part of a congregation that constituted itself on that basis; the gathering of believers, to meet around Scripture and worship, share bread and wine, and practise baptism.

We have the accounts too of the congregation in Gainsborough and Scrooby led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, who withdrew from parish worship, who gathered – eventually in secret, and under great pressure,

which finally led to them fleeing to Amsterdam – to worship, learn, and share ordinances in dependence on the same promise.

This promise in Matthew mattered so much to these believers because they recognised in it the authority to be – or rather to know themselves as – the true church in a way that was not dependent on State sanction or episcopal succession. Rather, they knew themselves as the church because they trusted the promise that in the gathering of the people in the name of Jesus, the Lord was among them – and that made them church.

It was for them the gathering that mattered; not just the meeting up with like-minded people to share ideas, but the gathering 'in the name' – explicitly identifying themselves as those who gathered, not on the basis of law, or of the presence of somebody supposedly part of a long succession leading back to the apostles' validation, but in the conviction that when they gathered in prayer, for worship, on the basis of their faith in the risen Christ, then he was among them and therefore they were church.





To be church therefore entailed being together. The church was not something that existed apart from those who confessed the name of Jesus and committed themselves to one another as fellow disciples. The church was not an institution which provided them with sacraments, salvation and access to the divine. The church was not something out there, over against them. The church was them in their gathering, with the Lord among them.

I suggest that nowadays it is hard to realise just how revolutionary that was – and how much it asked of people in terms of mutuality and shared discipleship. We – heirs of 400 years of history, including enlightenment thinking, and growing individualism – share a world view that is more likely to lead us to expect that the major question for early Baptists was to do with baptism for believers as an individual response and the challenge that posed to contemporary ways of thinking. And indeed, baptism as a mark of individual discipleship was important – but even more important was baptism as a mark of entering the church (it had always been), and since the true church was made up of those who gathered in the name, and in theory had and could express faith, baptism was for believers. This was the direction of their thinking. It was the gathering that determined the practice of baptism, rather than the other way round.

Gathering – not simply because being together was pleasant, but as a theological conviction expressed through a practical action – was at the heart of what eventually shaped Baptist origins. Gathering – because in that gathering the presence of the Lord was encountered and so faith was shaped and nurtured, discipleship was explored, and witness to the truth of God’s action in the world was expressed. Gathering was a fundamental aspect of being Baptist.

In a world in which ‘gathering’ can now be done in so many ways, both physical and digital, in which isolation is a real problem, and in which polarisation leads to mutual exclusion and a refusal to gather, I wonder what changes might be made if taking seriously the conviction that one of the marks of the true church is gathering in the name of Christ?

### QUESTION

‘Gathering – not simply because being together was pleasant, but as a theological conviction expressed through a practical action – was at the heart of what eventually shaped Baptist origins.’

**To what extent does this apply to you and your church or faith community?**



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**She is a Baptist historian and theologian, and in 2021 was presented with a set of essays to honour the contribution she has made to Baptist life: *Re-Membering the Body - The Witness of History, Theology, and the Arts in Honour of Ruth M B Gouldbourne* (Wipf and Stock)**

1 Luther’s seven marks of the church were; The Word preached, Baptism administered, Supper administered, Discipline of believers, Officers, Worship and Suffering.