



BAPTISTS AND THE BIBLE

Stephen R.Holmes

To cite this article: Stephen R.Holmes (2010) BAPTISTS AND THE BIBLE, Baptist Quarterly, 43:7, 410-427, DOI: [10.1179/bqu.2010.43.7.003](https://doi.org/10.1179/bqu.2010.43.7.003)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/bqu.2010.43.7.003>



Published online: 04 Dec 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 101



View related articles [↗](#)



BAPTISTS AND THE BIBLE

Stephen R. Holmes

-
- *Stephen Holmes is Senior Lecturer in Theology at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews*
 - *This paper argues that the Declarations of Principle of the Baptist Unions of Scotland and Great Britain both claim a distinctive account of how Scripture should be read. This account seems uniquely British, but can be traced back to the beginnings of the Baptist movement. It is marked by an understanding of Scripture as a mediation of Christ's personal authority, appropriated pneumatologically through the gathered church.*
-

INTRODUCTION

I suspect that, if we were able to gather the data for churches in Scotland¹ on any given Sunday, there would be less Scripture read in Baptist services than in those of almost any other tradition. Some Scottish Baptist churches will still read, in lectionary style, Old Testament, 'Epistle' and Gospel, and some will even start with a psalm, sung or recited. My suspicion and observation, however, is that in most Baptist services, Scripture will be confined to one, often very brief, passage read immediately before the sermon. In any Episcopalian church, by contrast, almost every word spoken in the liturgy will be directly and deliberately Biblical.

This observation bears investigation. Are we less Biblical than our Episcopalian sisters and brothers, or just 'differently Biblical'? Baptists

are, at least historically, a people defined by the Bible: our reasons for separate existence from other Christian denominations are largely a set of convictions about what it means for a church polity to be Biblical. Our convictions concerning the proper mode and subjects of baptism, in particular, are, throughout our history, remarkably untheologised: we do not have an understanding of what baptism is which leads us to behave in certain ways; rather, we discovered a Biblical practice, adopted it, and (occasionally) tried to think through what it implied about what we thought we were doing afterwards.

Of course, we are not the only Christian tradition that would make such a claim. Presbyterianism insists in its origins that its way of organising church government is true to Scripture; and in more recent times Brethren and Restorationist movements have made the same assertions. Even Anglican Episcopalianism in its origin wanted Biblical backing, the ordination service in the *Book of Common Prayer* claiming, perhaps rather ambitiously that 'It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests and Deacons...'²

We could attempt some scholarly evaluation of these claims, which would not support many of them, although we Baptists would fare less badly than most others. The attempt to defend infant baptism as a New Testament practice is almost dead, and has been for a generation or two;³ if a defence is to be mounted, it will be on the basis of a theological development of what baptism is and means. We ought to note, however, that there is equally wide agreement that the New Testament practice was baptism immediately following conversion, and the idea of preparation for baptism, or a catechumenate, is also a later development, and one which as Baptists we have been less eager to reject.⁴

No serious scholars of which I am aware now claim that a particular mode of church government can be discovered in the New Testament.⁵ Apostolic and immediately sub-apostolic churches knew a variety of leadership patterns, probably generally based on the social context of the town in which the church was based.⁶ There is nothing particularly Biblical, or unbiblical, about being congregationalist or presbyterian at

the level of fidelity to the church practices witnessed to in the New Testament. I think there is a strong argument for aspects of congregational government - notably, the sufficiency of each particular local church to ministry and mission, and the discerning of God's calling as the task of the gathered church members - but these are theological arguments based on what I understand to be the Biblical presentation of the nature of the Church, not direct exegetical deductions about early church practice.

More broadly, of course, Baptists have always found themselves a part of a wider tradition which also claimed fidelity to the Scriptures. In our seventeenth-century origins, we were an off-shoot of the English Separatists, themselves a radical wing of the Puritan movement, which was resolutely Biblicist in its attitudes. More recently, we have found ourselves a part of an Evangelical tradition which has inherited Puritan Biblicism, although it has understood it in various ways.⁷

In considering 'Baptists and the Bible,' then, we need to ask whether there is a distinctive Baptist way of interpreting and living out the Scriptures. I started with a suggestion that perhaps Baptists were 'differently biblical' than other Christian people; is this right, or do we relate to the Scriptures in much the same way as many others, but just disagree with them on a couple of points of interpretation concerning church practice? One of our best Biblical scholars, George Beasley-Murray, felt the latter option was so obvious as to simply assert it as axiomatic: one of his essays begins, 'Baptists are not distinguished from other Christians by a special view of the Bible that no-one else holds.'⁸ It is with fear and trembling, of course, that one even pauses to investigate that on which George Beasley-Murray has ruled, but I wonder whether the point is quite so obvious as he thought it to be.

There is now something of an academic fashion for uncovering the different positions held on apparently-shared matters by different communities. We have become increasingly conscious of what is sometimes, perhaps pretentiously, called 'the sociology of knowledge'.⁹ The point, however, is a simple and obvious one. Consider my own story: I was converted during a Christian Union mission whilst at university; it happened that the friend who took me under his wing

within the college Christian Union was then attending a local Baptist church, although previously and subsequently he was Anglican; as a result, I started going to the local Baptist church with him, and was there baptised. Sensing a call to ministry in that context, I candidated for ministry through the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and I began my theological studies in a Baptist college, Spurgeons. I later completed my doctorate under Colin Gunton, not Baptist, but a convinced and vocal Congregationalist.

I think that I have good theological reasons to believe what I do about the sacrament of baptism and about church order; I am also fairly confident that, had my university friend David taken me to a Presbyterian or Anglican church in those early days, there is a significant chance that I would now think differently. It is not possible to believe both those things at once without some account of a 'sociology of knowledge,' some understanding that the criteria by which we judge what are good arguments, and what are not good arguments, are shaped in part by the communities in which we are formed. Inasmuch as at least some of the basis for beliefs about church and sacrament is exegetical, this suggests that there are subtle differences in belief about the Bible, and about the proper way of reading it, that set Baptists apart from other communities committed to a Scripture principle, and that one absorbs and unconsciously deploys if one undergoes Christian formation within a Baptist context.

If we do not hold this, then we are forced to conclude either that the Biblical evidence on matters such as baptism is so obscure that faithful readers simply can come down on either side of the question, a conclusion which would seem to be uncomfortable, given the centrality of the practice of baptism in the NT,¹⁰ or that other Biblicist Christians are somehow less prepared to follow the plain teaching of Scripture. The latter route has been followed - consider, for example, Bush & Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, which avers in its preface 'We could wish that all evangelical Christians would search the Scriptures and thus prove what is true faith and practice...' ¹¹ - but, writing as someone presently heavily involved in pan-Evangelical theological work, I simply refuse to

entertain such suspicions about my sisters and brothers in other denominations without any evidence being presented.

So, I have suggested that there are good reasons for asking whether there might in fact be a distinctively Baptist view of the Bible. The next question, of course, is: if there is, what is it? I want in the remainder of this paper to demonstrate that there is a, fairly consistent, tradition of a unique approach to Scripture enshrined in British Baptist confessional documents, before ending with some practical comments about what all this means for the use of the Bible in our churches.

1. COMMUNITY AND INSPIRATION

An obvious place to look for Baptist distinctives is the confessional statements of our various Unions and Associations. The Baptist Union of Scotland Declaration of Principle asserts the following in its first clause:

That the Lord Jesus Christ our God and Saviour 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.

This is what Baptists in Scotland believe about the Bible, a part of ‘the basis of our Union.’ Other British Baptists believe something very similar: the BUGB Declaration of Principle has a slightly different Christological formulation at the beginning of its first clause,¹² but the material on the Scriptures is otherwise identical. The latter half of this clause - I shall return to the first part later - asserts a particular mode of Bible reading. Scripture is to be interpreted by the *church* - not some abstract metaphysical ecclesial entity, but the local fellowship of believers. Bush and Nettles, in the book to which I have just alluded, cite Balthasar Hubmaier as insisting that Christian people should ‘assemble to search the Scriptures’.¹³ In church meeting, in being together around the Bible, we discover the guidance of the Holy Spirit and properly use our liberty to follow Christ as best we can discern.

It seems to me that there is a properly Baptist emphasis here: not that we will not read the Bible alone (would that we did much more!), or that we will not attend to the preaching of the Word (again...), but our convictions concerning what church is, and how Jesus exercises His authority in His church, lead us to a belief that it is primarily in the gathered congregation that the truth of the Word will be heard and discerned. Church meeting is a practice not-quite-unique to Baptists (we share it, and a heritage, that led to it, with Congregationalists), but it is a part of what defines us as a people.

The 'guidance of the Holy Spirit' is also asserted as necessary to Scripture reading in the Declaration of Principle. This is hardly unique to Baptists, of course, but it bears reflection. The question is: what practical difference to Bible-reading practices should result from our confession of belief in the necessity of inspiration for the readers of Scripture, not just for its authors? Putting aside such trivia as seeking to investigate the eternal destiny of the author of a commentary before trusting her interpretation, it seems to me that the claim is an important and stark one concerning what the older Reformed theologians called the 'clarity' or 'perspicuity' of Scripture.

That Scripture is perspicuous is a vital Reformation doctrine, but one that has been routinely misrepresented, particularly amongst American Evangelicals, including Baptists, in the last century or so. The essence of the doctrine is that Scripture is available, in the sovereign good purposes of God, to readers regardless of their ecclesiological or academic qualification. The doctrine is not a claim that Scripture offers 'public truth,' equally accessible to the unregenerate as to Christians - indeed, this point is repeatedly denied by Reformation and later Reformed writers, often with an appeal to II Corinthians 4:3.¹⁴ The standard rhetorical device of Baptist preachers, denying personal authority and inviting the congregation to test what is preached against the Scriptures, assumes the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture: neither our ordination nor our academic training make us privileged interpreters of Scripture; the meaning of the text is available, in God's purposes, to every reader.

Why does this matter? Well, originally, without it we could not have had a Reformation. Consider the Papal Bull that led to the Diet of Worms, *Exsurge domine*. Early in the text, the claim that Luther, like other heretics, has wrongly interpreted Scripture is made clear;¹⁵ later, three reasons for presuming his interpretation to be wrong are offered:

Eorum singulis diligenti trutinazione, discussione, ac districto examine, maturaque deliberatione omnibusque rite pensatis, ac saepius ventilatis cum venerabilibus fratribus nostris sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalibus, ac regularium Ordinum Prioribus, seu Ministris generalibus, pluribusque allis sacrae Theologiae, necnon utriusque juris professoribus sive magistris, & quidem peritissimis: reperimus eosdem errores, respective (ut praefertur) aut articulos non esse catholicos, nec tanquam tales esse dogmatizandos, sed contra Ecclesiae catholicae doctrinam sive traditionem, atque ab ea verum divinarum scriptarum receptam interpretationem...¹⁶

Luther's opinion is wrong first, because it conflicts with the exegesis of those whose interpretation is privileged because of ecclesial rank - 'the cardinals of the holy Roman Church, and ... the priors and Ministers general of the religious orders' - second, because it conflicts with the best academic exegesis of the day - 'professors, masters expert in sacred theology, and also in both sorts of law' - and third, because it conflicts with the church's authorised interpretation. Against this, Luther famously demanded to be convinced 'by Scripture and plain reason'. The text was clear, or perspicuous; he did not need to be cardinal or professor to understand it.

But - and this is my point about misunderstanding - what the Reformation did not claim is that Scripture is clear in the way my daughters' children's encyclopaedia is clear. The meaning of Scripture is not simply available to all who can read the language; rather, there is one qualification and one only for being able to extract meaning from Scripture, and that is the aid of God's Spirit. The flaw in most current Evangelical presentations of the doctrine of Scripture, when considered against this Reformed background, is that they simultaneously make the meaning of Scripture both too obscure, suggesting that some measure of

reading expertise is necessary,¹⁷ and too available, suggesting that the Bible yields its meaning like any other book. Our Declaration of Principle avoids this error, by insisting on the necessity of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Now, personally I would understand this in a quasi-sacramental way, suggesting that Scripture comes with some sort of promise attached, that God's Spirit will be present revealing God's Christ to anyone who comes to the text humbly, honestly and prayerfully, but, whether this is right or not, the point remains that the understanding of Scripture is still a gift of grace, not something naturally available to us.

So what? Well, at this point the Declaration of Principle is usefully coherent. It is an odd piece of ancient text that is better understood by a rag-tag gathering of people qualified only by a shared covenant to walk together than by, say, a seminar of expert historians and philologists. If we are going to claim that the right place to read Scripture is in church meeting, then we are going to need to give some account of how that works, and this pneumatological hermeneutics, this suggestion that the aid of the Spirit is necessary for the right reading of the text, is the Declaration's way of making sense of this odd claim. In the sovereign purposes of God, the meaning of Scripture is more available in an ecclesial context than in an academic one; being a member in good standing in a local church fellowship is a more important qualification for finding truth in Scripture than any level of expert knowledge in any field whatsoever.

It seems to me, however, that the emphasis on communal reading is also an important qualification here, in two ways. First, it offers a set of checks and balances to bad readings of Scripture: both the shared faith and insight of the community, and the tradition and story which has shaped the church to be the people it is, are inevitably, if quietly, brought into play by an insistence on communal reading, providing a guard against eccentric private interpretations. I would see this, too, as part of the work of the Spirit in opening the truth of Scripture to God's people.¹⁸ Second, the particular community that is the church will not, normally, be without some measure of 'academic' training and insight: members who have a lifetime of faithful attentiveness to good Christian teaching;

trained and ordained pastors and leaders; others who bring various levels of formal or informal academic knowledge and interpretative skill. None of this is necessary to the right reading of Scripture, but, on a Baptist telling, in the place where Scripture is most naturally read, these gifts also are available in the good providence of God to aid the community in its joy and duty of discerning the meaning of God's word in Scripture.

2. CHRISTOLOGY

What of the earlier phrases of the Declaration of Principle? The text again:

That the Lord Jesus Christ our God and Saviour 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.

When compared to other Evangelical statements of a Scripture-principle, this is strikingly *Christological*; the Bible is a mode of transmission of the authority of Christ. It is possible to read too much into this decision, of course: in a commentary on the BUGB Declaration the principals of the four English Baptist Colleges in 1996 drew a comparison with the Barmen Declaration, and quoted Barth in exposition of the Baptist view.¹⁹

Now, I have no wish at all to align myself with a rather-too-common Evangelical line on Barth's doctrine of Scripture, which has tended to dismiss it without ever actually understanding it,²⁰ but I find the connection here rather forced. I do not suppose, in the absence of any evidence, that English Baptists had in 1906 pre-empted some of Barth's most characteristic insights.²¹ Bracketing this, however, the English principals make an important point: Evangelical confessional material on Scripture, including some that would have been available to the framers of our Declaration,²² and also including the proposed BUGB statement of 1888,²³ typically uses the word 'authority' to refer directly to the Bible; the decision to do something different carries implications, even if they are not necessarily 'Barthian' ones.

We should ask, of course, whether this is something local to the British isles and recent, or whether it represents a historic Baptist conviction. The answer would seem to be, working on the basis of confessional material alone, that it is something distinctively British - American Baptists do not seem to have the same emphasis²⁴ - but that it can be traced back to the founding of the Baptist movement.

The notion was already implicit in at least some Separatist writings before the emergence of the Baptist movement. Of particular importance is the *True Confession of the Faith* of 1596, produced in Amsterdam and probably written by the Pastor of the Brownite church there, Henry Ainsworth.²⁵ This document asserts that 'in this word Jesus Christ hath reveled whatsoever his father thought needfull for us to know, beleeve & obey as touching his person & Offices...'²⁶ This confession was significant for the production of the celebrated 1644 London Confession. The Mennonite Waterlander Confession, which John Smyth was sent in 1610 and signed, spoke of Christ 'govern[ing] the hearts of the faithful by his holy Spirit and Word...'²⁷ Helwys's counter-confession of 1611 is even more explicit: '[Jesus Christ] being the only KING, PRIEST and PROPHET off his church, he also being the onely Law-giver, hath in his Testament set downe an absolute, and perfect rule off direction, for all persons, at all times, to bee observed...'²⁸

In the 1644 Confession, the Scriptures are noted at the beginning as the place where 'God hath plainly revealed,' but this is filled out in the consideration of Christ's prophetic office: 'Touching the Prophetie of Christ, it is that whereby he hath perfectly revealed the whole will of God out of the bosom of the Father, that is needful for his servants to know, beleeve, and obey; and therefore it is called not onely a Prophet and a Doctor and the Apostle of our profession, and the Angel of the Covenant; but also the very wisdom of God, and the treasures of wisdom and understanding.'²⁹

The 1644 Confession is important here because it is perhaps *the* decisive statement of Baptist identity in history. Its Christocentricity is no doubt derived from the *True Confession* of 1596, but is by no means unique in seventeenth-century Baptist documents. To take only two further examples, *The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations*

(1651; representing Baptist churches of the English midlands) repeatedly speaks of Jesus Christ as ‘the Lawgiver’;³⁰ and the Somerset Confession of 1656 asserts ‘As he [Jesus Christ] is our prophet, so he hath given us the scriptures, the Old and New Testament, as a rule and direction unto us both for faith and practice...’³¹

This testimony is not universal in the seventeenth century. A number of Baptist confessions assume a doctrine of Scripture, or, dealing only with points of controversy, fail to mention the Bible. Notably, the 1677 Second London Confession is essentially a revision of the Westminster Confession,³² and as such starts with a Scripture principle that will be the foundation for Christology, rather than a consequence of it. However, Ch.XXVI (a complete re-writing of Ch.XXV of Westminster) seems to pull this back towards the positions I have been discussing in its treatment of the church, stressing Christ alone as the head of the church, and his authority mediated through the ministry of the Word.

The location of Scripture under the head of Christology, then, is a persistent and unusual³³ doctrinal decision of British Baptists. One might say that the more normal Protestant position has been to locate Scripture under pneumatology, with an account of inspiration being the decisive dogmatic basis out of which a doctrine of Scripture will flow; the Baptist confessions discussed do not deny inspiration, of course, but change its dogmatic function in the doctrine of Scripture. This distinctive position is also, I believe, one which accords well with the general shape of our theology. It is a standard piece of Baptist polemic to insist that Christ alone is the true head of the church; if this is the case, then any account of how authority operates in the church ought, theologically, to be referred fairly directly to Christ.³⁴ If Scripture is authoritative in the church, as of course it is, then we need a Christological account of that.

3. THE BIBLE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

For Baptists, then, authority in the church is primarily the authority of the living Christ, who makes His ways known to His gathered people through His Spirit in His Word, the Scriptures. What does this say to us about our use of the Bible in our churches?

Firstly, and negatively, this theological claim says nothing about hermeneutics. Questions over the appropriateness or otherwise of an historical-critical method, or the use of typology to find Christ in the Old Testament, or whatever, are not answered by this theology. We might claim that this indifference leaves us free to explore the hermeneutical question in other directions; I suspect, however, that we should read more into it than that. Any normative account of hermeneutics necessarily introduces the idea of privileged readers of Scripture - Scripture is better read by people with a certain body of knowledge, or certain skills. I have already indicated that it seems to me that our Baptist vision necessarily denies that. In church meeting, the newly-baptised teenager has as much right and as much duty to speak and to be a part of the gathered church's discerning of the mind of Christ as revealed in Scripture as the experienced pastor or the expert theologian. This suggests to me that our Baptist vision is actually in principle opposed to any formal account of Biblical hermeneutics, if we mean by that a definition of right and wrong ways to read the Bible.

What might this mean? Not, I think, that 'anything goes': clearly it does not, we are describing the duty of the church to discern the mind of Christ under the guidance of His Spirit, not some anarchic free-for-all. Rather, I would want to link a rejection of controlling hermeneutical theories to an account of God's sovereignty: what we cannot do, ever, is predict in advance how Christ will choose to speak to us in His Word when we are gathered in His name. We can of course be fairly confident about a lot of things He will not say, and probably about a lot of ways He will not speak, but we cannot confine His sovereign voice to certain modes of address which we happen to find intellectually acceptable. A proper theological account of Scripture will lead us to reading practices that are appropriate to the nature of the text we are reading, and so 'better' (i.e., 'more faithful to the text') than other practices. However - the decisive point here - better/more faithful reading practices are no guarantee of our right hearing of the Word. In His gracious sovereignty, the Lord Jesus may choose to grant His people the decisive insight through someone whose interpretative strategies are far worse than those of others who are gathered.

God's Word in Scripture is constantly awkward, angular, surprising. We do not have neat tools to control and dissect it. It captures us in unexpected ways; it subverts our expectations, evades our classifications, and overturns our assumptions. Our task is, in humble, prayerful dependence on God's Spirit, to be open and attentive to the way in which Christ shall choose to address us today. Any normative account of hermeneutics is an attempt, doomed to failure, to seize control of the living Word from the hands of Christ the Lord. We engage in Biblical study to be shaped and remade by the Word, not to force it into patterns and shapes we happen to find acceptable.

Secondly, and positively, this account of the nature of Scripture points to a livingness of the Word. We do not have a dead letter, a deposit of truth; we have what the old British coronation service used to call 'the lively oracles of God'. In Scripture we find the words of long dead prophets and apostles, yes, but much more significantly in and through them we find the living word of the living Christ. This again stresses the surprising and unpredictable nature of Scripture. If we are reading Scripture right, if we are reading Scripture in a Baptist way, we should be excited and probably scared about the new transformations and vocations that we will find each time we come, together, to hear the Word of God in the book.

We have seen a curious shift of interpretative strategy through Christian history. The Fathers generally found the Bible to be overflowing with meaning. Every text could live and speak in a multitude of ways; the word was living and active and fecund. This gradually ossified into a sense that there were four, well-circumscribed, ways of reading each text of Scripture, but the original idea was much more vivid, and much less neat, than that.³⁵ Today we tend to believe that there is one and only one meaning of any given text - whether it be the meaning the original author intended or something rather less fanciful and obscure - and, scared of the possibility of misreading, we struggle to extract any meaning from a given text of Scripture, regarding it as something of a triumph if we do. It seems to me, simply, that our Declaration of Principle would suggest to us that the older way was better.

One more comment: the Declaration of Principle suggests that what we find in Scripture is 'His laws'. Scripture, on this telling, asks more to be obeyed, than to be believed. I had the privilege of giving the Laing Lecture in 2008,³⁶ and there I argued that there were reasons for supposing that this was a distinction that could be drawn between doctrines of Scripture either side of the Atlantic. British Evangelical confessional statements routinely speak of Scripture's authority; our American brothers and sisters take their stand on its inerrancy.

Now, I do not want to push this distinction too far. Indeed, I indicated in that lecture that an authoritative text probably needs to be inerrant, if we think hard enough about it, but I wonder, in the context of my current topic, whether we British Baptists are in some sense the purest form of this British Evangelical tradition. For us, what we find in Scripture is God's laws, and that shapes our use of Scripture in important ways. I commented at the start of this lecture that it is sometimes quite hard to find a Baptist theology of baptism; rather, we have a Biblical praxis. Our instinctive response to Scripture is not to look at what it has to say about the sacrament, come to a rich understanding of what baptism is, and then discuss what we should do to best reflect the nature of the sacrament. Instead, we find a particular baptismal practice in Scripture and follow it, not pausing often to ask what it means or why it is appropriate.

This becomes important in our reading of the strange text that God has been pleased to give us as His inspired Word. We come to the Bible asking how Christ calls us to live. And I suspect, if we press this hard enough, as Baptists we come asking not how Christ calls us to live in general, abstract terms, not looking for a universal ethic or law, but asking how Christ calls us to live as the people we are, in the situation we face. After all, according to the Declaration of Principle, 'each Church has liberty ... to interpret and administer His Laws.' Each congregation will be guided by its participation in wider Baptist and Christian life, of course, in all sorts of formal and informal ways,³⁷ but its calling is not to decide ecumenical truth; it is to hear Christ's call to this covenanted body of His people, in this place, at this time. If we were attentive to this calling, we would, I suspect, hear far more Scripture

than we do in our worship services, and hear it as a lively voice, speaking pointedly and powerfully to the particular questions and failings of the particular congregation at the particular time. We would come to Scripture expecting to hear God speak directly to us through the text, and intending to obey what we hear, so that Christ's name may be heard, believed on, worshipped and glorified more and more on this earth, until the day when He shall return.

- 1 I had the privilege of giving the inaugural lecture to the newly-formed Scottish Baptist Theological Society in November 2008. This paper is an edited version of that lecture. I am grateful to the Society, and particularly to Andrew Rollinson, for the invitation, and to members of the society for their comments, particularly to Dr Jim Gordon for his gracious and perceptive response.
- 2 The Preface to *The Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, Book of Common Prayer* (1662).
- 3 There are isolated exceptions, the most considerable perhaps being G.W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1979); Bromiley, however, is a historian of doctrine, not a New Testament scholar. More often, infant baptism is defended on an Old Testament basis, as a continuation of the practice of circumcision.
- 4 See David F. Wright, *What has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism?* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) for a cogent account of the history of these developments.
- 5 There are still popular-level movements that seem to regard such claims as defensible and important - most noticeably, in recent Scottish Baptist life at least, Mark Dever's '9 Marks Ministries'. Usually, the Biblical evidence presented is trivially easy to dismiss: it almost always relies on an (unstated, unexamined, and undefended) assumption that *διακονος* and *πρεσβυτερος* are technical ecclesiological terms, and so must refer to the same order or office in Acts and the Pauline epistles (and the catholic epistles, in the case of *πρεσβυτερος*). This is not dissimilar to assuming that the English word 'manager' must mean exactly the same thing in widely separated contexts, and so that the woman who runs my local supermarket does the same work as Sir Alex Fergusson.
- 6 For a thorough review of the evidence, and a plausible sociological reconstruction of what lies behind it, see R.A. Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005).
- 7 For Evangelical Biblicism, see David Bebbington's classic study, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), *passim*; for robust assertions of continuity with the Puritan tradition, see now Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Leicester: Apollos, 2008), again *passim*, but particularly Stewart's own essay, 'The Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture, 1650-1850' (pp. 394-413).
- 8 George R. Beasley-Murray, 'The Gospel Baptists Preach from the Bible' in Walter B. Shurden (ed.), *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Bible* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), pp. 131-7, quotation from p. 131.

- 9 See, for an introduction, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1991). For the sort of 'soft' approach to the sociology of knowledge that I regard as inescapable (as opposed to the 'harder' approach of, say, Mannheim or, rather differently, recent postmodernist writers), see classically Max Scheler (tr. M.S. Frings) *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge* (London: RKP, 1980).
- 10 See, for instance, Mt. 28:18-20.
- 11 L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), p. xvii.
- 12 'That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute...' cited from Richard L. Kidd, ed. *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley, 1996), p. 10. BUS adopted the BUGB Declaration from 1906, but BUGB revised it in 1938 to make this change (so Kidd, p. 30).
- 13 Bush & Nettles, p. xv.
- 14 On which see summaries by Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics: set out and illustrated from the sources* (ed. Bizer; tr. Thomson) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950), II.17, and Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725 Vol. 2: Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), pp. 322-340; see especially the discussion on pp. 333-5.
- 15 [C]uius vera sacrarum literarum interpretatione posthabita, quidem, quorum mentem pater mendacii excaecavit, & veteri haereticorum instituto, apud semetipsos sapientes, scripturas flagitet, proprio dumtaxat sensu, ambitionis, auraeque populis causa, teste Apostolo, interpretatur...' *Exsurge domine* (text from Laerzio Cherubini, *Magum Bullarium Romanum* [1692] I.614).
- 16 *Exsurge domine*, Cherubini I.615. 'We have therefore thought rightly, and spread wisdom, through a careful weighing, a discussion, a strict examination, a mature deliberation, with all our honoured brothers, the cardinals of the holy Roman Church, and with the priors and Ministers general of the religious orders, and with many other professors, masters expert in sacred theology, and also in both sorts of law [*sic*, civil and canon]. We have found that these errors or theses are, as stated above, not Catholic, and are not such things as are to be taught, but they are against the doctrine and tradition of the Catholic Church, and also the true interpretation of the divine Scriptures which is received from her...' (my tr.)
- 17 Any account that makes grammatical, literary, or historical knowledge *necessary* to reading Scripture errs, if this point is taken seriously.
- 18 This notion of the Spirit working through normal processes of community life is one I explored and defended in a slightly different context, although still to do with the reading of Scripture, in my *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002); see particularly p. 158.
- 19 Kidd, *Something*, pp. 28-9.
- 20 For an account of some of the history in brief compass, see the first part of Kevin Vanhoozer's essay, 'A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation' in Sung Wook Chung (ed.) *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 26-59. The choice of Vanhoozer to deal with the topic in this volume, and Mark D. Thompson's careful and respectful treatment in his 'Witness to the Word: On Barth's Doctrine of Scripture' in David Gibson and Daniel Strange (eds) *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (Nottingham: IVP/Apollos, 2008), together

- represent a welcome change from the dismissive tone developed in the wake of Carl Henry and Cornelius van Til's misreadings.
- 21 Although it would be interesting to trace any possible influence from P.T. Forsyth, the great Congregationalist, who develops themes not dissimilar to Barth's. See particularly John Thompson's essay, 'Was Forsyth a Barthian before Barth?' in Trevor A. Hart (ed.), *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of Peter Taylor Forsyth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).
 - 22 Notably the 1846 Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith; the 1922 Basis of (what was to become) the FIEC; and the 1928 basis of the UCCF.
 - 23 Proposed in response to criticism by C.H. Spurgeon that the Union lacked a proper doctrinal basis. On Scripture, it stated 'The Divine Inspiration and Authority of the Holy Scripture as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice; and the right and duty of individual judgement in the interpretation of it.' (from William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), p. 345).
 - 24 None of the American symbols reproduced by Lumpkin deviate from a standard Protestant affirmation of the authority of Scripture.
 - 25 So Lumpkin, p. 81.
 - 26 Cited from Lumpkin, p. 84.
 - 27 Art. 18; tr. From Lumpkin, p. 107.
 - 28 Art. 9; Lumpkin, p. 119. Incidentally, this development of the *munus triplex* into a key interpretative tool in an exposition of the Christian faith seems to be a fairly significant driver of the sort of Christological account of Scripture I am tracing here: as can be seen from the quotations I offer, in many of the confessions here noted, Scripture is related to the prophetic office of Christ.
 - 29 Arts. VIII & XV, from Lumpkin, pp. 158 & 160.
 - 30 See arts 21; 23; 28; and 52. Lumpkin, pp.178-83.
 - 31 Art. XVIII; cited from Lumpkin, p. 207.
 - 32 The only addition to the lengthy article on Scripture is an introductory sentence: 'The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience.'
 - 33 It is absent from the Westminster Confession, and thus from the great majority of Presbyterian doctrinal standards; Congregational denominations have often used a recension of Westminster, the Savoy Declaration, but the 1833 *Declaration of the Congregational Union of England and Wales* is equally representative of the general protestant position. Without offering a full survey of post-Reformation symbolics, it is fair to say that the closest any Lutheran or Reformed document comes to this idea is Q.31 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which affirms that Jesus is ordained by the Father and anointed with the Spirit to be '...zu unserm ewigen König, der uns mit seinem Wort und Geist regieret...' The Scots Confession of 1560 contains the delightful affirmation that 'the trew Kirk ... alwaies heares and obeyis the voice of her awin Spouse and Pastor...' (Art XIX), but this is only in the context of a denial that Scripture derives its authority from the church. (Both texts from Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*.)
 - 34 This makes the 1677 Confession interesting, in that it tries to follow Westminster and Savoy on Scripture, but when it comes to Christ's Lordship in the Church, seems to be pulled strongly back towards the distinctive Baptist position I am describing.
 - 35 Origen, for instance, held that every text should be heard to speak of Christ, and also that the text was always available and useful for all people, whatever their level of spiritual advancement. Thus it presented different meanings at different levels,

- allowing all to be changed and led by it.
- 36 Now published as 'Evangelical Doctrines of Scripture in Transatlantic Perspective' *Evangelical Quarterly* LXXXI.1 (2009), pp. 38-63.
- 37 In formal terms, expert guidance may be sought from the denomination, from other fellowships that have faced similar questions, or from cross-denominational bodies. At the same time, those members who gather to discern Christ's calling on their life together through Holy Scripture will gather with particular stories and histories, having learnt from sermons, conferences and books, and having talked with neighbours, family and friends. All of this informal background will become, at least potentially, a part of the discussion.
-

SOCIETY NOTES

ADHSCL CONFERENCE 7-9 September 2010

The Association of Denominational Historical Societies and Cognate Libraries is holding a conference on 'Protestant Nonconformity and Christian Missions' at Luther King House, Manchester. For booking, contact the Secretary, Mrs Pauline Johns, 33 Addison Road, Caterham CR3 5LU, secretary@adhscl.org.uk. The full cost is £140, with options for part-time or day attendance. Speakers include: Professor Clyde Binfield, Professor Brian Stanley, Professor J. Gwynfor Jones, the Revd Dr John Darch, Dr Tim Grass, the Revd Margaret Jones, the Revd John Pritchard and the Revd Geoffrey Roper. If you wish to offer a brief communication, contact the Revd Dr Martin Wellings, convenor@adhscl.org.uk.

* * * * *

Kerry J. Birch, *Waters of the Son: Baptists in Georgian Bath*, is now available from www.kappa-beta.org.uk, £15-00 plus p&p.

* * * * *