

the baptist ministers'  
**journal**



**July 2023 volume 359**

**Every Baptist a Missionary**

Charlotte Henard

**An Anniversary Reflected**

Keith Jones

**Exorcising the Demon of Self-Harm**

Anon

**Baptists and Confessions**

Crispin Woolley

**The Great Dura-Europos Cover-up**

Mike Smith

**Mykons**

John Edwards

**Reviews**

**Of Interest To You**

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# the baptist ministers' journal

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<i>Every Baptist a Missionary (Charlotte Henard)</i>	5
<i>An Anniversary Reflected: 100 Years of the Yorkshire Baptist Association (Inc) (Keith Jones)</i>	10
<i>Exorcising the Demon of Self-Harm (Anon)</i>	16
<i>Baptists and Confessions (Crispin Woolley)</i>	19
<i>The Great Dura-Europos Cover-up (Mike Smith)</i>	26
<i>Mykons (John Edwards)</i>	30
<i>Reviews</i>	31
<i>Of Interest To You</i>	35

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Useful contact details are listed inside the front and back covers.

*(all service to the Fellowship is honorary)*

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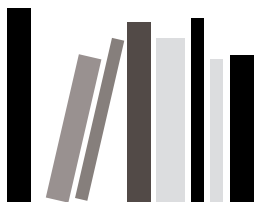
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## from the editor

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### Honouring the pastor-scholars

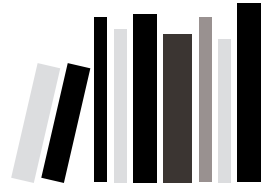
This issue of *bmj* is a summer smorgasbord of thoughts and reflections by ministers and I hope that there will be something for everyone here. First, the BMF Committee is delighted to feature the prize-winning essay for 2023 by Charlotte Henard, a timely and persuasive argument calling on every Baptist to be a missionary, as stated in our Declaration of Principle. Chris Friend, the runner-up entrant, will have his essay published in a later issue. Very well done to both. The Baptist theme is continued in Crispin Woolley's article on confessions.

At the YBA Centenary Assembly in April, Baptist historian Keith Jones presented a fascinating compressed history of the YBA, which he has kindly adapted for us to read in *bmj*. Baptist life in Yorkshire has always been innovative and Keith ably outlines some of the key developments—hopefully this innovation will continue as the north of England grapples with the need for new ways to preach the gospel in the 21st century, calling out new and creative church initiatives.

I commend to you also the short article on self-harm, written with great courage—any of us could find ourselves in despair and this article offers us hope alongside honesty.

The issue is completed with Mike Smith's ecclesial reflections on what has been discovered at Dura Europos, and with a short article on a unique Bible study method, John Edwards' 'Mykons' (also featured on Facebook).

Baptists have a fine tradition of pastors who continue their scholarly work by reflecting on what they do in church, and this issue is a tribute to that work going on quietly across the country. We will need more such work as we discern how to respond to contemporary key issues such as the same-sex marriage debate—work that combines theological ability with a passion for the mission of God. We celebrate this work through events like Theology Live and Baptist Theology North, and in the pages of *JBTC* and *bmj*. The hard questions of post-christendom will resist easy answers and call us, like Jacob, to wrestle with God until we find blessing. *SN*



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## Every Baptist a Missionary

by Charlotte Henard

*Author: Charlotte Henard is in her final year as a Minister-in-Training at The Well Church, Sheffield.*

The priority of mission is a defining theological Baptist principle, featuring strongly in the Declaration of Principle. Based upon Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 18:18-20, the Principle defines the basis of the Union in three parts, with the third being, 'That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world!'<sup>1</sup> While mission has always been a feature of Baptist life and belief, figures like Oncken in the 19th century stand out for holding to this zealously. He famously said, 'every Baptist a missionary,' believed that every apostolic church should be a mission society, and required church members to commit to writing how they would serve Christ, so that they may be held accountable.<sup>2</sup> More recently, 'The last twenty-five years have seen Baptists attempt to make mission an organising priority and at the same time, in some quarters, to be a place of theological reflection.'<sup>3</sup>

The priority of mission is inter-related with other Baptist principles and, while not exhaustive, this essay will seek to demonstrate how mission fits within a Baptist understanding, and the significance of this in Baptist life today.

### Theology of Mission

There has been a 'paradigm shift'<sup>4</sup> in how the church views mission, developed in the Willingen 1952 statement and later called *missio dei*, which saw mission not as an activity of the church, but as something that God is doing with which the church gets to join in. Mission is not constituted by activities or projects or fads, but is who God is, and therefore 'who' the church is. This is not a new way of doing mission, but rather a reversal of the complacency of Christendom whereby '...rather than leave the 99 to look for the one, the church puts most of its efforts into maintaining the one (the proportion of the population involved in church) and ignores the 99 who are lost.'<sup>5</sup>

An understanding of God's full and active involvement in mission led European Baptists from talking about 'the mission of God' to 'the missionary God'. Christopher Ellis' hymn *Missionary God* was written for the 1992 Baptist Assembly to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Baptist Missionary Society, and the phrase begun to be used by then General Secretary David Coffey. '[T]he phrase...became embedded in Baptist God-talk from the mid-1990s onwards.', and was used in the 2005 publication *Gathering for Worship* and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Yet is there a Baptist theology of mission? Holmes argues that while there are 'a disproportionately large number of world-leading missiologists' who are Baptist, 'Baptist missiologists do not...seem to have yet developed a distinctively Baptist missiology.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the theological understanding of *missio dei*, and even a missionary God and church, can be seen to mirror wider evangelical thinking of the time. This is perhaps not surprising, for Baptists do not congregate around a central doctrine, but are instead recognised by the principles that bind them and mark their lives. 'Baptist distinctives do imply a way of doing theology.'<sup>8</sup> The Declaration of Principle, for example, is 'notably theological and identifies an authentic expression of Baptist ecclesiology.'<sup>9</sup> So while Baptists may not hold a distinctive doctrine of mission, their principles determine both the centrality of mission and how this might take shape within a Baptist understanding.

### **Baptist Principles and Mission**

Believer's baptism is for those who can freely give an account of their faith and

their own will to be baptised. This has several relevancies to mission. Most significantly, it is through this act that believers are baptised into participation in the mission of God, identifying with Jesus' death and resurrection through the motions of full immersion, and therefore identifying with Jesus in His being sent by the Father, as in John 20:21. Furthermore, Baptists' 'refusal to baptise children of church members' means that the 'Baptist church is always very visibly one generation away from extinction.'<sup>10</sup> This may act as a propellant towards mission, and also brings a new perspective to activities such as children's work, which is seen as missional because it is with those who are outside of the church.<sup>11</sup>

The sacraments of baptism and eucharist can also be seen as being 'missionally shaped,' and often used as 'visual sermons.'<sup>12</sup> Baptisms are often public events to which the unchurched are invited, or they are held outside. The elements of the service are intentionally focused on those outside of the church, with an accessible theme, testimonies, and a presentation of the Good News. Similarly, the eucharist, while often closed to unbelievers in a Baptist setting, may be seen as missional. The words are recited not in prayer but in proclamation of God's acts to those around.'<sup>13</sup> Fiddes also views the liturgy of the eucharist as missional; it ends with 'let us go forth in peace,' which echoes Jesus' words in John 20:21 before his sending of the disciples, and so the eucharist ends with a sending out into continued mission.<sup>14</sup>

Baptists hold strongly to the authority of the Bible. Increasingly, modern biblical scholarship calls for a missional

hermeneutic that is 'a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as its central interest and goal'.<sup>15</sup> In the Old Testament, God's people are chosen for the sake of the world.<sup>16</sup> Election and covenant in the Old Testament are the means by which God calls people to holy and righteous lives so that others might also be drawn into this blessing. As we have seen, Jesus is sent by the Father and in this way sends his disciples. From here, many of the New Testament books are about furthering international mission. Indeed, the Baptist Declaration of Principle is centred around the key missional text of Matthew 28:19-20; 'Disciples are those who 'go' under the 'authority' of the risen Jesus to 'baptise' into the trinitarian 'Name' of God. In a feast of theological ingenuity the Declaration has drawn us into a full and demanding commitment to the heart of the Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

As nonconformists, Baptists affirm the separation of church and state, which has an impact on mission. Without a parish system, individuals are not automatically part of the church; the church doesn't automatically qualify to speak into public issues of government; children are not automatically raised within the vision of a Christian nation. All of this increases the intentionality of mission, as none of these areas are to be taken for granted, but Baptists must step into their neighbourhoods, secure change in public life, and speak to the next generation.

A valuing of one's own conscience is instead a Baptist principle, and this individualism 'intensifies the evangelistic imperative'.<sup>18</sup> This must be coupled with a commitment to discipleship and holiness, which moves beyond conversion and

seeks to form mature disciples. It is, however, important to recognise where evangelism has gone wrong in the past and to prevent this in the future. The third clause of the Declaration of Principle focuses on 'personal witness' and 'evangelisation', which in the past has led to an imperialist view of mission. Instead, mission must be interactive and include both partnerships and humility. 'Viewed through the "mission of God" prism we do not find this surprising, for in the sending of Jesus God did not "Lord it over us", but entered a remarkable venture of risky and vulnerable love.'<sup>19</sup> Baptist ecclesiology makes this possible, as the individual church may discern together the missional mind of Christ and join in with this, which should lead to innovation rather than imperialism.

The potential Baptist tendency towards individualism is countered by its commitment to covenant. Because God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are covenanted together, we get to participate in the godhead.<sup>20</sup> This outworks itself as gathered church, in which we get to participate in God's mission together. Mission itself forms community, but these are not homogenous groups as mission starts with God's initiative, and His grace cuts across barriers.<sup>21</sup> Mission is therefore for all. Unfortunately, this hasn't always been the Baptist understanding; Particular Baptist churches in the 18th century, with their theology of election, 'not only failed to regard mission as the essence of the church, but were even reluctant to see it as the responsibility of the church'. This changed towards the end of the 18th century with 'Fullerism' or 'evangelical Calvinism' which saw the birth of BMS and evangelism at home.<sup>22</sup>

The principle of the Lordship of Jesus takes a broader view of mission beyond evangelism or proclamation. Instead, the scope of mission stretches to include justice, reconciliation, and the transformation of society as the Kingdom of God is ushered in, under the Lordship of Jesus. Crucially, this principle means that mission must be christological. The Declaration of Principle 'begins and ends firmly with Christ: Christ who enables us to glimpse, if as yet darkly, the dynamic life of the triune God which carries us on its flow out into active discipleship with the missionary God.'<sup>23</sup> Baptist mission, then, is clear of its position and its incompatibility with pluralist theologies which stand in contrast to Jesus' own words: 'No one comes to the Father except through me.'<sup>24</sup> The Bible demonstrates the 'scandal of particularity' through individual people like Abraham, individual people groups like Israel, and God-as-individual Jesus. For Baptists, 'Christianity is Christ or it is nothing.'<sup>25</sup>

### **Baptist Life and Mission Today**

Today, Baptists find themselves in a continued place of decline, with less than half of people declaring themselves as Christian in 2021 for the first time in England and Wales.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, there is a growth in those who self-classify as 'spiritual but not religious'—at least 18% in the US.<sup>27</sup> In the UK, 'only half (51%) of those who identify as non-religious said they do not believe in God.'<sup>28</sup> This context must be taken seriously. 'Baptists, holding to the believers' Church tradition, have a vocation to a theology which is always being renewed...It is not enough simply to ask how we can get the gospel across—we have to keep asking together what the Good News of God is.'<sup>29</sup>

Baptist principles illuminate how Baptists may engage missionally, and there is no singular feature that is most important today—to remove any would be to redact what it is to be Baptist. Instead, both the context and Baptist understanding must speak to one another. The focus on one's own conscience will likely appeal to those who self-classify as 'spiritual but not religious' who seek 'to integrate religious wisdom without fully committing to what is perceived to be the false trappings and mendacity of religious accoutrements of all kinds.'<sup>30</sup> Yet Baptists must avoid offering a consumer-style spirituality, and hold this principle of one's own conscience alongside the principle of covenanting together into gathered church.

### **Conclusion**

Baptist principles provide a depth of understanding for Baptist mission today. They are interrelated, informing why and how Baptists are to be missional, which is a necessity in today's context of church decline and yet spiritual openness. Not only is mission integral to being a Baptist, but it is also imperative today. The Declaration of Principle describes this as the 'duty' of every disciple. Yet we must not be consumed by modern negative connotations with this word. Rather, it is our duty because we participate in the life of Christ, which we are baptised into. We have a missionary God, so we are a missionary people. What's more, as a priesthood of all believers, mission is the duty of everyone, and not a set-aside few. In the words of Oncken, 'every Baptist a missionary.'



## Notes to Text

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29. Haymes, *Theology and Baptist Identity*, p3.
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## Can you review books for bmj?

Contact **Mike Peat** on [michael3peat@gmail.com](mailto:michael3peat@gmail.com) with your details and the kind of books you are interested in.

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# An Anniversary Reflected: 100 Years of the Yorkshire Baptist Association (Inc)

by Keith Jones

*Author: Keith Jones is a Baptist minister and is now retired, but was Rector of IBTS in Prague from 1998-2013, and served as General Secretary of the YBA from 1980-1990, as well as in national and local Baptist roles. Keith is also a Baptist historian.*

This year (2023) the Assembly of the Yorkshire Baptist Association was held at New North Road Baptist Church, Huddersfield and the assembled delegates, Association team, Executive and friends were asked to celebrate the 100th anniversary. Now, it must be said that associating beyond the local Baptist ecclesial communities in Yorkshire is much older than that. One hundred years is but a fraction of the timeframe of baptistic life on the Pennine ridge, in the East Riding and in South Yorkshire. So, has this anniversary any missiological relevance? You might expect, and you would be right so to do, that a Baptist historian would want to focus on the ecclesial and missiological moments of associating together which are formational in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. And yet, is there something to be noted and celebrated in 100 years of being an incorporated organisation, a company limited by guarantee?

## **The Rossendale Round**

Before we can properly answer the question of why to celebrate 100 years of incorporation, some groundwork needs to be done. Baptist life in Yorkshire began centuries earlier. Records suggest there were Baptist soldiers in York in 1647

and at Horton, near Bradford, in 1655. Their preachers, David Lumbey and John Clayton, corresponded with Oliver Cromwell. In the 1670s Thomas Tillam from London had established a Baptist cause in Pontefract. Though subject to persecution, the Baptist causes at York and Horton made applications for licences to gather and worship in 1672.<sup>1</sup>

For our purposes, it was the work of cousins William Mitchel and David Crosley creating what we commonly call the 'Rossendale Round' which saw the pioneering phase of baptistic communities working together to expand the mission of the people of God. They established preaching stations and assembly points across the Pennine ridge. Mitchell from Heptonstall Slack near Hebden Bridge and Crosley from Barnoldswick in the borderlands soon had a round, or we might say, circuit, of preaching stations and ecclesial communities with groups in Yorkshire at Heptonstall, Barnoldswick, Rawdon, Gildersome, Heaton (Bradford), Sutton-in-Craven and Stoneslack. This was church planting on a rapid and impressive scale! By 1711 several of these causes were operating independently, but always in filial cooperation with the others.

## **An Association Formed in 1719**

The first sense of associating, as we might understand it today, was a gathering across the two counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire, which began meeting annually in 1719. The concerns then were about protecting the rights, under law, of the Protestant Dissenters known as Baptists. The Government and state church had many penalties imposed upon those who gathered in these baptistic meeting houses and though they were 'tolerated' since the late 1600s, they were very limited in the mission they could exercise. When some in our own nation talk today about withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights, it is worth remembering that we belong to that line of people who have struggled to acquire our human and religious rights and these can never be taken for granted, especially in a nation where some politicians see these as values which can easily be suppressed or removed from citizens.

Perhaps the association meetings of the 1700s had an agenda radically different to our own. Unlike Alvery Jackson, pastor at Barnoldswick in the 1700s, we no longer have to campaign for hymn singing, nor do we worry so much as to whether there should be a laying on of hands at ordination and discuss the voting rights of women at church meetings and was there a case for the financial support of weaker churches by the stronger ones. These things are commonplace now.

This '1719' cross-Pennine association continued until about 1738, doing good and useful business, but perhaps failed to meet the needs of the churches as they reflected on the challenge of coming out

of the hills and valleys into the growing urban centres as the industrial revolution took hold and hand loom weaving in cottages became replaced by the mechanised looms of the spinning sheds.

## **1787 and the Revived Association**

There was growth and development of baptistic life even in the period after the 1719 Association sunk into oblivion. New causes were founded, but 1787 marks a revival of the concept of working together across the three counties of Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire. In Colne in 1787, representatives gathered realising that in a socially rapidly changing world Baptists must learn afresh and adapt to address the challenge of moving populations and the changing economic landscape from rural farming to the growth of the great industrial cities and the urbanisation of communities. There were those who wanted 'no change', as if they could be protected in some form of enclosed garden, but others, like the energetic John Fawcett (the lad from Lidget Green, Bradford, who was sent by the Westgate Baptist Church to be pastor at Wainsgate above Hebden Bridge) caught the vision of revitalised mission—and for revitalised mission, educated pastors were needed. I grew up in a church where one old Deacon cautioned me 'the church is emptied by degrees', but with Fawcett and his ilk, I refute that approach. Fawcett both revitalised associating and was the key figure in establishing in 1804 the Northern Baptist Education Society with the vision of providing a mission-focused educated ministry in the north. At this time there was only one Baptist College in these islands, at Bristol, to which Fawcett had sent young men to train.

Yet, he, with others, could see that church development and expansion required an educated and mission-focused ministry formed in the north and working in the north.

Education for mission was a starting point, but there was also the recognition that some struggling causes were not able to provide a stipend of value to save their pastors from poverty. So, Fawcett and his colleagues created an Association fund to help pastors in need. This is a reminder that mission cannot be undertaken if those being urged to spearhead the work are struggling to protect and support their families. Another development in the revitalised Association was an Itinerant Fund to promote the proclamation of the gospel in new venues. Rapid church growth followed, and the 1787 Association of 17 churches was 66 by 1837.

Alongside this vital Association of Particular Baptists<sup>2</sup> there was a growing community of New Connexion General Baptists, also engaged in church planting in the rapidly growing urban areas.<sup>3</sup> Leading this work was the irrepressible Dan Taylor, a Halifax lad who crossed the moors to Haworth to hear Grimshaw, Wesley and others preaching. A confirmed member of the state church, as he read the scriptures, full of evangelical fervour, he realised baptism as a believer was the New Testament injunction. He went to the Calvinist, John Fawcett, in Hebden Bridge and asked for baptism. Fawcett declined to do it as Taylor had come to a living faith under the Arminian teaching of Wesley. Though Fawcett and Taylor were divided on doctrine they were to become, and remain, lifelong friends.

Fawcett encouraged Taylor to seek out General Baptists in the East Midlands and be baptised by them, which Taylor did.

Taylor, with his brother John, set to work with a will, expanding from their Birchcliffe base in Hebden Bridge to Halifax, Queensbury, and then moving down into the growing woollen metropolis of Bradford. Taylor and friends gradually withdrew from the 'old' General Baptists who were becoming moribund or unitarian and created a dynamic New Connexion of General Baptists full of missional insights from the Methodist revival. As the 1800s developed, they moved into close cooperation with those Particular Baptists, led by Fawcett, who embraced evangelical Calvinism, today often called 'Fullerism,' associated with Andrew Fuller and the Baptist Missionary Society.<sup>4</sup>

This combined force of Taylor's New Connexion and the evangelical Particular Calvinists pressed forward with a rapid movement of chapel development in all the main industrial centres of the West Riding and South Yorkshire throughout the second half of the 1800s. This was the era when Baptist laypeople engaged with wider society, serving as mayors of the newly incorporated boroughs, as Members of Parliament for key Yorkshire constituencies, generally in the Whig, or Liberal cause. The Association itself campaigned against slavery, spoke out on the evils of drink and voiced that classic form of dissenting Christianity, not least in support of W. E. Forster and his Education Bill of 1870 and the desire for revision to limit the support of state church schools. By 1887 the Association had 87 member

churches when an event was held with the Lancashire and Cheshire Association to mark 100 years since the revitalised Association led by John Fawcett had been created.

### **1902: Approaching a Period of Sustained Growth**

With the continuing growth in the number of churches and the expanding work of the Itinerant Fund and a Loan Fund to help communities build and expand existing buildings the Association came to the view that a full-time General Secretary was needed. The Revd J. Gyles Williams was appointed, who served in that role until 1928. In 1906 the Association reached its zenith in terms of number of church members with the statistics recording 23,196. This was the era when the Baptist Union, driven forward by the redoubtable John Howard Shakespeare,<sup>5</sup> sought to draw the Associations into a way of working together across the UK with what, today, we call the Home Mission fund, by utilising the growing number of full-time Association Secretaries like Williams into a Union post of General Superintendents.<sup>6</sup> This marked a shift in missional development from the Association to the Baptist Union as Shakespeare sought to create a national programme of church development and advance.

### **1922 and the Incorporation of the Yorkshire Baptist Association**

The special 100th anniversary of the Yorkshire Baptist Association (Incorporated) in 2023 may not seem, at first glance, to be of significance. The Association was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee in 1922, so,

properly, the first incorporated meeting was held in 1923. Perhaps at the time not everyone appreciated the significance of this move, but what it allowed was for the Association to become a Trust body, that is to say, becoming custodian trustee of church properties and assets. Until this time, churches had only been able to appoint individuals as trustees. So, in 1696 when David Crosley purchased a barn and cottage in Barnoldswick to serve as a home for the Baptist community there, a trust deed had to be created and signed by people who became the first trustees of the Barnoldswick Baptist Church.<sup>7</sup> Of course, local individuals as trustees can be a problem. They die, move on, cease to want to serve, requiring the legal appointment of others in their place and, occasionally, they can be problematic to the ongoing mission of the church as decided by the members and deacons.<sup>8</sup>

Incorporated Associations provide perfect, ongoing and consistent custodian trustees, and the Yorkshire Baptist Association has provided that safeguarding model from 1922 until today. More than that, in 1941 the Association created a Model Trust available for churches being formed and planted. Trust deeds are, perhaps, an undervalued aspect of our common life, but act as a control and a missional opportunity in shaping church life and denominational allegiance.<sup>9</sup> There have, of course, been later national model trusts, but, as in so many things, Yorkshire has been a pace setter in baptistic life.

That is why, in 2023, it makes sense to mark this particular moment of associating. Though the high point was

reached in 1953-1954 with 157<sup>10</sup> church communities and today we have around 100 baptistic communities in Yorkshire, the movement of church planting has remained key.

The custodian trust work has created a developmental fund in the region of £4 million in Yorkshire to enable work to be done, as our foreparents did, to engage in church planting in new areas. The great industrial communities of Bradford, Doncaster, Halifax, Huddersfield, Hull and Sheffield may be past their grand moments. At one time Baptists use to speak of the three powerhouses of Baptist life—Bristol, Birmingham and Bradford, and that may no longer be the reality for Birmingham and Bradford, nevertheless, the resources of the past can be usefully applied today to establishing new communities of baptistic life.

### **Yorkshire Baptist Life in 2023**

The vision of Taylor and Fawcett was to come down off the hills and advance into the industrial metropolises created in that era of Victorian expansion. Today, we see vibrant signs of life, often working cooperatively and ecumenically with others, among students and in the dormitory towns and communities. There is also the creative opportunity of working with ethnic communities who have come to live among us in Yorkshire. Iranian refugees in Sheffield, Wakefield and Huddersfield are proving to be an important seedbed for believers' life. Ukrainian people, displaced by war, are making their homes here. Churches are taking hold of the vision that the Warm and Welcoming spaces movement have opened up to us in the aftermath of the height of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The current YBA Regional Team are fully alive to all these possibilities. May God grant them the grace to bring to pass new missional vision and opportunities.

### **Notes to Text**

1. For more information on these early forms of associating see Ian Sellers (ed), *Our Heritage: The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, 1647-1987*. Yorkshire Baptist Association & Lancashire and Cheshire Baptist Association: Leeds, 1987.
2. For the history of the growth of Particular Baptists in England see B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*. London: the Baptist Historical Society, 1983; Ian Birch, *To Follow the Lambe Wheresover He Goeth: The Ecclesial Polity of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1640-1660*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017; and Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists*. Woodbridge: Boydell 2006.
3. Frank Rinaldi, *The Tribe of Dan*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008; Richard T. Pollard, *Dan Taylor 1738-1816*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2018.
4. On this period see J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*. Didcot: BHS, 1994.
5. Peter Shepherd, *The Making of a Modern Denomination: John Howard Shakespeare and the English Baptists 1898-1924*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001.
6. The General Superintendents, who existed until the early 2000s, were appointed by a joint committee drawn from members of the Baptist Union council and from the Associations in the 12 regions Shakespeare created. They were Union employees who met monthly to assist the BUGB General Secretary in promoting the work of the Union and in coordinating the work of ministerial settlement. The General Superintendents for the North East Area (Yorkshire and the Northern Association) were J. Gyles Williams, Henry Bonser, J. O. Barrett, Sydney Clark, Arthur Liston, Tasker R. Lewis, Iain D. Collins and W. Ernest Whalley. The post was then

abolished and there is now a team of Regional Ministers employed by the Association.

7. The Barnoldswick Baptist Church is in the final legal stage of amalgamating with the daughter churches at Earby and Salterforth to form the West Craven Baptist Church.

8. See my article 'The Industrial Revolution: effects upon the Baptist community in Barnoldswick and the resulting "split" in the Baptist Church' in *Baptist Quarterly*, 1983, XXX (3).

9. Keith G. Jones, 'The Authority of the Trust Deed: A Yorkshire Perspective' in *Baptist Quarterly*, 1989, XXXIII, p103.

10. To make a more viable Northern Association in terms of the current model of Regional Associations, the churches of the Cleveland district transferred from the YBA to the NBA in the 1990s.

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## *bmj* Essay Prize 2024

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

### **Baptist History and Principles, Biblical Studies, Theology or Practical Theology, Mission**

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

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

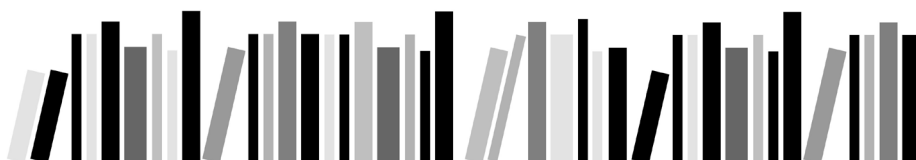
### **Closing date: 31 March 2024**

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

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

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

*Contact the editor if you have any queries.*



# Exorcising the Demon of Self-Harm

Anon

*When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" (Mark 9.28)*

I am male, married, and middle-aged. I am educated, thoughtful, and a person of deep faith. I am the leader of a church, and have been ordained for over two decades. I also have battled with poor mental health and self-harm for most of my adult life; not that most people who know me would know it. I have got a little better at telling people over the past few years, but my default position remains that of wanting to keep my secret, because deep down I still feel deep shame at 'not being strong enough'. The story I want to tell is my story, but it is far from unique. I am sharing because it is mine to share, but also in the hope that it will help others.

How far back do these things go? Should I tell you that as a baby I never wanted to be held, and would cry and wriggle until I was put down again? Attachment theory would suggest that even at this early age there was some conflict writing itself into the pathways of my brain. Should I tell you that my father exercised an old-fashioned form of discipline? I'm sure it has relevance. But the story really begins at secondary school. I had cruised through primary school—in those heady days before the National Curriculum, I was largely left alone while the teachers

concentrated on more troublesome children. So I read my way through the school library, loved maths and logic problems, and was interested in science and history. I passed my 11+ with ease and was sent to the local boys' grammar where I was suddenly, and catastrophically, out of my depth. Up against peers who had been to prep-school, and encountering the violence of the rugby field for the first time, I went straight to the bottom of the class and stayed there for several years.

For a person whose sense of self-worth is hard-wired against a sense of personal achievement, failure was a painful lesson to learn. I remember few friends from those years, with most break and lunchtimes spent hiding in toilet cubicles crying until it was time to resurface for lessons. Looking at school reports from those days shows a child with a poor attendance record, and even worse attainment. I was bottom of the class in almost every subject, and teachers were questioning whether I should be removed from the school and sent somewhere less 'demanding'.

It was also during my early teens that I started to play 'suicide games'. I'd set myself an arbitrary target, such as whether I could hold my breath until I had walked to the end of the road, and then if I failed I would know that I didn't really



want to live. I would then undertake a random act of danger, such as riding my bike from a side road across a main road with my eyes closed, to see if I would get hit by a car. I don't know how serious I was about actually ending my life at this point, I think it was probably more that I just didn't really care if I lived or not, and was leaving it up to chance / God as to whether I had to endure another day.

Gradually things improved at school, both academically and in terms of my mental health. I swapped the rugby field for the less traumatic cross-country squad when I was 14, scraped enough exams to be allowed to stay on for sixthform, and then scraped enough A-levels to go to university. It was there that I discovered the pattern of self-harm that would haunt me for the next 25 years. I remember sitting alone in my room in first-year halls of residence, and feeling overcome with anger at myself for what I perceived as my failure. Before I knew it I was hitting myself as hard as I could in the head, on my temple, repeating over-and-over a mantra that I would come to know well, 'I hate you, I hate you, you're an idiot, you're useless, you're a failure, I hate you.'

Why this particular form of self-violence? Maybe I was repeating an internalised pattern from childhood, but I also remember a friend at school telling me that he used to hit himself, so there may also be an element of peer-socialised behaviour (apparently there often is). Whatever its origin, it became mine. I have had to explain black eyes to concerned friends, I've given myself concussion, and my wife has had to endure the pain and guilt of watching me act out.

In my 20s, as a newly ordained minister, I returned to suicide games, except with more intent to carry through with the act. I can remember on several occasions tying plastic bags over my head to attempt to suffocate myself, and leaving them on until I started to feel light-headed before ripping them off. Consistently here it was the thought that my wife would be the one to find my body that outweighed the desire to no longer be. I also used to drive my car to a deserted stretch of road, shut my eyes, and accelerate whilst counting to 20—again leaving it to 'God' as to whether I lived or died.

My main trigger is when I feel I am being blamed for something I cannot control. If someone is angry towards me when I don't feel I deserve it, or if I have been trying my hardest but that still 'isn't good enough'. These scripts of failure and self-hatred run deep, and once triggered I can feel myself spiralling towards an act of self-harm; it feels like an inexorable descent which drags me down until I hit the bottom. I have tried various tactics to offset it, with varying degrees of success. Walking out of the situation, and then walking and walking until I calm down has helped. Punching my leg instead of my head has helped. But in the end it was a year of weekly psychotherapy that provided the key.

For many years I was in denial of the seriousness of how unwell I was. I hid it from everyone, including myself, writing off moments of darkness as aberrations that would not be repeated. My mentality is one of being a 'fixer', and I love thinking about problems and finding solutions to them. I was convinced that with sufficient

thought, self-discipline, and prayer, I would be able to resolve this struggle on my own. I used to use the analogy of living in a room with a poisonous snake asleep in the corner of the room: you have two choices, either tiptoe round it to avoid waking it up, or start poking it with a sharp stick. It took me many decades to admit that the snake was not only awake, but was biting me and could one day kill me. At this point I decided to seek help.

It was in psychotherapy that I first told to another person the story that I've summarised above, and in the telling came knowledge of myself, and in that knowledge I found healing. I discovered the power of the simple mantra, 'It's not your fault', which I now say to myself when I am overwhelmed with feelings of self-hatred and blame. I have not self-harmed for many years, although there have been a few occasions when I have come close. There are no more suicide games.

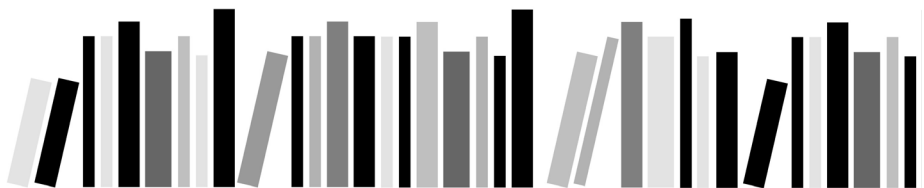
For me, the best language to describe the process I have been through in recent years is that of the exorcism of a demon. My spirituality is not one of signs-and-wonders, and I don't see the demonic hiding in every shadow. But I do think we can carry our demons—of guilt, shame, self-harm, and addiction—and I do believe that these can be exorcised.

For me the key was the relationship with my therapist, for others it will be something different.

I remain mindful of Jesus' saying that:

*When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. (Luke 11.24-26)*

Poor mental health is not something one simply banishes from a person, it returns and haunts and oppresses. I am not 'healed' of my struggles with mental health. But the demon of self-harm has gone, and I no longer internalise hatred of myself in ways that tend towards violence. Things I have found helpful to keep the house 'swept and put in order' include regular exercise, a spiritual director, and cultivating a mindset of gratitude for the good things in my life. Also, for me, learning to be honest with others about my struggles, and becoming willing to accept that I don't walk this journey of life alone.



# Baptists and Confessions

## by Crispin Woolley

*Author: Crispin Woolley is minister at Woodside Baptist Church.*

Any exploration into the historical and contemporary relevance of confessions of faith for English Baptist life must consider three key criteria. First, their use as expressions of religious liberty; second, their statement of theological convictions in defence of the faith upon which those initial expressions are founded; and third, their existence as representing a commitment to comport with the tenets of the faith they profess, and thereby constituting a precursor to covenant living. Unless these criteria can be considered to have been adequately demonstrated, it is questionable whether the confession they evoke provides a truly coherent basis for communal religious practice.

### **Expressions of Religious Liberty**

In the early Christian churches, 'confessions of faith' had not yet been deemed essential, with only creedal formulas having been drafted, and with these serving more as declarative statements of unity among disciples than as providing doctrinal elucidation. The dawn of the European Reformation, however, witnessed a prodigious outflow of confessional documents, with both Roman Catholicism and Protestant nonconformity each striving to surpass

one another.<sup>1</sup> The first Baptist confessions appeared principally in England at the beginning of the 17th century and were either Arminian (General) or Calvinist (Particular) in character. They drew heavily upon the documents of preceding Separatist denominations, although expanding upon them to identify and evolve uniquely Baptist positions on key issues such as church government, church membership, and the mode of baptismal practice. While these confessions arose from either local fellowships or from affiliations of like-minded congregations—thus being possessed of a slightly compromised historical import—it remains noteworthy that there exists a remarkable consistency in Baptist principles throughout their confessional history.<sup>2</sup>

In 1610 John Smyth believed he had discovered the 'true' church, and so attempted to enjoin his congregation of English Separatists with the Dutch Anabaptists, accepting re-baptism from them in avowal of their apostolic rights of succession. Thomas Helwys, however, broke from Smyth in 1611 and returned to London in the company of several fellow leaders,<sup>3</sup> whereby he subsequently drafted what is widely considered to be

the first 'Baptist' confession of faith, that being the 'Declaration of Faith of the English People Remaining at Holland in Amsterdam'.<sup>4</sup> The treatise affirmed the catholicity of both the local and universal church and thus established a 'free' church understanding *via* his expression of 'diverse particular congregacions [sic]'; wherein each local assembly is possessed of 'the whole Christ' together with 'all the means of salvation'.<sup>5</sup> This was especially significant because English semi-Separatists had previously vacillated between appealing for toleration of independent churches while simultaneously accepting state authority for religious oversight. The Baptists, conversely, appealed to the authority of God as communicated *via* scripture for all matters of polity and doctrine; asserting their right to passive resistance wherever laws of the land were in contravention with the scriptures, and concluding instead that the only proper stance for believers was to uphold personal religious liberty for all. Both Smyth and Helwys documented these convictions in 1612, with Smyth stating that:

*... the magistrate is not by vertue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compell men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leaue Christian religion free, to euery mans conscience, and to handle onely ciuil transgressions, iniuries, and wronges of men against man [sic].*<sup>6</sup>

While Helywys made a similar plea, with his being addressed to the King of England:

*... mens' religion . . . is betwixt God and themselves [. . .] Let them be heretikes, Turcks, Jewes, or whatsoever,*

*it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them [sic].*<sup>7</sup>

By 1644, this position was consolidated by seven Particular Baptist churches into the First London Confession, a declaration consisting of 50 articles which explicated a threefold distinctiveness in their departure from the 1596 Separatist Confession, these being: (1) adoption of the 1619 Calvinist declaration of the Synod of Dort; (2) advocacy of the baptismal mode of immersion; and (3) admission of new members solely by such baptism upon the profession of adult believers.<sup>8</sup> The confession contained in its preface an apologetic appeal for outsiders to join, and issued a recognition of magisterial authority that was motivated by a considered need for toleration from the state.<sup>9</sup> Gordon Belyea interprets this last point as serving to identify the Particulars as a Puritan nonconformist sect—one whose form of Calvinist soteriology associated them more closely with Congregationalist semi-Separatists than with Arminians or Anabaptists.<sup>10</sup> Following the Great Ejection of 1662, Baptists focused upon expressing themselves in contradistinction from other Separatist groups. Apologetic confessionalism was replaced by efforts to obtain a place in the wider Christian tradition by delineating their theological development while simultaneously emphasising their continuity with the past.<sup>11</sup> Tony Peck observes that, despite their similarities, no clear consensus could be reached between Baptist denominations. The 1677 Particular Baptist Confession professed liberty 'to all opinions not contrary to Scripture,' while the 1678 General Baptist Confession advocated simply for

'limited religious freedom'—with such vagaries remaining equally contentious for contemporary Baptists.<sup>12</sup> Timothy George laments the fact that theological consensus among Baptist denominations had become so degraded by the 20th century that their distinctiveness was more ably stated by what they were not rather than by what they were.<sup>13</sup> Stephen Holmes, consequently, views a return to the traditional Baptist use of confessions as being vital for preserving the primacy of independence on the part of the local church over and above the directives of any national institution;<sup>14</sup> so safeguarding the Reformation marks of a 'true' church and ensuring that the practices of future Baptist congregations will adequately replicate 'the proper visible instantiation of this one [true] church.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Statements of Theological Convictions**

Though the 1644 First London Confession represents the first instance wherein immersion was articulated as the 'essential mode of proper baptism,'<sup>16</sup> this was merely a restatement of theological convictions already established rather than to advance a new position. In actuality, most of its contents were drawn extensively from the 1596 True Confession of the Congregational church, and so firmly demonstrated Particular Baptist approval of traditional Calvinist soteriology.<sup>17</sup> It seems apparent that the Particulars were seeking to distance themselves from the Anabaptists; especially since by the time the 1677 Second London Confession had been drafted they had begun to openly express 'hearty agreement' with Presbyterians and Congregationalists in adherence to 'wholesome protestant doctrine.'<sup>18</sup>

The 1677 Confession thus represents one of the foundational documents from which Baptist theology developed; constituting an adapted version of the Westminster Confession and affirming a predominantly Calvinist positions on polity and practice. Its definitive influence on both the Philadelphia and Charleston confessions is confirmation of its significance.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the 1689 confessions (produced by both Generals and Particulars in response to the Act of Toleration)<sup>20</sup> not only demarcated Baptist identity, but also fixed the Baptist movement within the history of English Christianity.

The 18th century, however, witnessed a resurgence of Arianism. As early as 1719, the Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists had gathered in London to debate their subscription to traditional trinitarianism. A vote was held, during which those proposing assent to Arianism prevailed, and from which time onward Arianism became a troubling influence, especially among General Baptists.<sup>21</sup> In response, 1770 brought a sustained effort to reaffirm traditional Baptist orthodoxy against General Baptist heterodoxy and Particular Baptist rigidity. A New Connexion of General Baptists led by Dan Taylor agreed upon six articles of faith, these being proposed as 'theological glue' to unite the opposing parties.<sup>22</sup> Regrettably, these articles were rushed to elevation as a test of subscription—especially for new ministers—and thus just five years after their institution they were abandoned, prophesying potential fault lines for the blossoming Union.<sup>23</sup> In 1785, Taylor produced a unique confession for his own Whitechapel church in which he

afforded equivalent authority to both the 'book' of nature and the 'book' of scripture as complementary sources of God's total revelation.

By 1873, the encroachment of modernism and scientific naturalism had advanced so much that suspicions arose the Particular Baptists were planning to supersede the 1689 Confessions. The nascent Baptist Union therefore opted to introduce a formal Declaration of Principle with the intention of 'holding in union Baptists with widely different theological understandings.'<sup>24</sup> This action provoked Charles Spurgeon to charge them with having forsaken their allegiance to scripture. Subsequently, in 1887, he published two articles alleging the Baptist Union to have 'downgraded' their convictions and calling for the institution of a creedal confession.

As the leading New Connexion minister and President Elect of the Baptist Union, John Clifford's reaction to these events caused Spurgeon to officially renounce his membership. In 1888, and in response to Spurgeon's charge, Clifford issued a Declarative Statement of Faith upon which basis Baptist congregations were invited to approve their membership.<sup>25</sup> His statement stipulated six 'facts' (or doctrines) as being representative of Baptist orthodoxy, acceptance of which indicated an experiential transformation rather than intellectual assent. The permanence of the Baptist Union was thereby instituted upon a willingness to unify without creedal accord.<sup>26</sup> In 1901, a catechism was prepared by the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches which presented a 'simple theological scheme' incorporating focus upon the

person and work of Christ, the authority of scripture, and the need for personal evangelism.<sup>27</sup> A remarkably similar scheme was published by the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 2000, entitled *The Baptist Faith and Message*, and which delineated Baptist adherence to five fundamentals.<sup>28</sup> The very production and content of this scheme unfortunately recast the nature of contemporary Baptist theology as being derivative rather than revolutionary. A version of the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle remains to his day—having been progressively refined under scrutiny from the combined assaults of biblical criticism, moral relativism, and postmodernism—but now consisting of a threefold proclamation which affirms (1) scriptural authority, (2) believer's baptism, and (3) the priority of mission.

Jason Duesing invites renewed investigation into the roots of Baptist distinctiveness and authenticity.<sup>29</sup> He insists that the duty of the church is to guard and deposit the sacred truths of scripture;<sup>30</sup> suggesting that Baptists have historically demonstrated a singular concern for such preservation and thus represent a biblically coherent 'form' of Christianity, absent from any constraints of denominational traditionalism.<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Chase, however, notes that Calvinist theology is directly responsible for consumerist tendencies in Western capitalism, with 21st century churches bearing witness to these tendencies in their treatment of members as customers to whose every need they must cater: self-interest takes precedence over the sovereignty of God; persuasion is preferred over conviction; and strategic

intentions supersede the propagation of the gospel.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore essential to question to what extent—if at all—a renewed emphasis on confessional covenant-keeping might provide practical benefits for contemporary Baptists, while serving to advance the *missio dei*.

### **Precursors to Covenant Living**

Philip Schaff assesses the Baptist position on confessions as being declarative and as possessing an apologetic function, but nothing more. No-one is compelled to offer obedience to the confessional contents, merely their intellectual assent. He argues that this is consistent with their tradition, since although they were drafted to affirm the orthodoxy of the authors and adherents, they were never enshrined as tests as such, and therefore wherever one or several churches ascribed to their contents this was merely a document of shared beliefs.<sup>33</sup> John Claydon concurs, observing that while there is no single confession that defines Baptist orthodoxy, there do exist recurrent themes throughout the history of their production and use. These themes include liberty, independence, baptism, authority, and covenant.<sup>34</sup> It is this historically overlooked and most culturally unfashionable theme of covenant living which may possess the greatest potential to reinstate a truly Baptist witness that meets the needs of our time.

For James McClendon, the Western church is in dire need of restitution to its 'primitive' state as the eschatological community, comprised of those who—*via* baptism—have been translated into God's kingdom.<sup>35</sup> Richard Bourne agrees, asserting that without such

a compensation in the church's hermeneutical self-understanding its members will never be empowered to live faithfully within the 'messy middle' of the already-not-yet. He references the writings of John Howard Yoder as epitomising a challenge for contemporary Christians to reject dualistic metaphysics in which the invisible 'true' church resides within 'the mass of nominally Christian citizenry', and so to return the church to being a community of disciples obedient to the way of Christ.<sup>36</sup> This restitution can be achieved via a reconstituted doctrine of baptism which successfully emphasises its practice as representing both 'public' and 'prophetic' statements announcing the threefold arrival of the kingdom of God (1) in history; (2) in the life of the believer; and (3) in the local congregation.

Within this kingdom-focused model covenant living ceases to be about human decision, instead signifying induction on the part of the believer into a new authority, and a new humanity, and which exemplifies 'the divinely empowered sociology of the Christian community'.<sup>37</sup> Nigel Wright describes membership of such a community as being 'organic' and 'consensual' rather than 'organisational' and 'constitutional',<sup>38</sup> and as having the potential to obviate any confusion that arises whenever satisfactory assent to some declaration of faith is unhelpfully linked to membership of National Associations or Institutions.<sup>39</sup> John Claydon concurs, noting that although faith professions are personal, they are nevertheless precursors to covenantal community, and that contemporary Baptists thus have a propensity to become 'doctrinally covenantal in regard

to translocal relationships, but practical isolationists in reality.<sup>40</sup> It nonetheless remains possible to retain independence alongside unity, and to enshrine communal effectiveness without any renunciation of freedom. He posits that:

*Covenant relationships bring responsibilities to walk together in appropriate mutuality, but it is a covenant that listens to God through one another rather than imposing what may be discerned by an ecclesial elite. It is a covenant of liberty as well as one of accountability.*<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Faced by turmoil and persecution after the dismantling of supra-ecclesial authority, the first English Baptists asserted their freedom of religion *via* apologetic declarations which enshrined their distinctiveness. These statements subsequently developed into formal confessions whereby their convictions were affirmed as analogous with scriptural orthodoxy. Latterly, and paradoxically, assent to the very same declarations which asserted religious liberty became utilised as a means of verifying subscription to denominational principles. It remains to be seen whether what began as a movement whose insistence upon obedience to the sovereignty of God has instead become corrupted into just another mode of subjection to human oversight. If the latter is the case, then perhaps a return to the movement's historical, primal motivations might bring about not only a renewal of spiritual integrity, but also evangelistic power.

## Notes to Text

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- 18 Belyea, 61–62.
- 19 George, 339.



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- 23 Rinaldi, 27.
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- 39 Wright, 39–40.
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## Writing for *bmj*

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If you have something to share that might serve other ministers, contact the editor, Sally Nelson, on [revsal96@aol.com](mailto:revsal96@aol.com), to find out how to submit an article. We are interested in ministry, mission, theology, pastoralia, evangelism, planting, reflections, Baptist history and principles, etc etc.

If it interests you, it will interest someone else – get in touch! It is YOUR *bmj*.

# The Great Dura-Europos Cover-up

by Mike Smith

*Author: Mike Smith is now retired from Baptist ministry but still writes on church history and hosts a Bible Exhibition.*

Dura-Europos only gets five lines in the *Oxford Dictionary* of the Christian Church. Excavated by Americans from Yale between 1930 and 1934, the full report was not finally published until 1969. You cannot blame the original excavators—their eight-volume report is a model of thoroughness. Why the delay?

There was an initial flurry of interest in the work because a Greek scrap of Tatian's *Diatessaron* was found there. This was a 2nd-century work combining the four gospels into one account. In the Leeds Royal Armouries, they have on display some pictures of late Roman cavalry from the church building, but no further details. Thus it is not an unknown site. But there is a suspicious reticence about what was found there. Why?

It was 70 years *before* Constantine's famous declaration of tolerance that a house in Dura was converted into a place of worship. At that time Dura was a garrison town on the Roman frontier with the Sassanian Persians. It was the home of the 20th cohort of the Palmyrenes, a late Roman formation of heavily mailed cavalry and archers. Pictures of two such soldiers were painted on the walls. But in 232 AD the Christian congregation in Dura took it over as their place for worship.

Most of the congregation were probably soldiers. The Roman army was not too worried about their squaddies' religions provided they'd fight for Rome. Maybe the former owner was a Christian. The pictures of soldiers were later whitewashed over and renovations started. The building was almost square, with rooms built around a central courtyard. One pair of rooms had a wall taken down, to make a meeting place for about 60-70 people. A sentence in the *Oxford Dictionary* does mention this, but nothing more. Why?

The answer is that the biggest work was next. A full and complete baptistery was built in the next-but-one room, with another room in between where candidates were prepared for baptism. The baptismal pool was about 5 feet square and could hold up to 3 feet depth of water. It had two elegant pillars on either side of the pool, and on the back behind the pool was a picture of the Good Shepherd. The picture of Jesus here is of a perfectly human shepherd wearing a knee-length tunic, and carrying a sheep on his shoulders, while he guides a flock of sheep as well. This is the first of a series of pictures mainly on New Testament themes, placed in two rows one above the other in the room where the baptismal pool is situated. Unfortunately, many-of

these have been damaged or destroyed because in 256 AD Dura was attacked by the Persians. Houses along the walls were part demolished in an unsuccessful attempt to strengthen the city walls. However, Dura fell to the Persians, and after this the site was abandoned.

The room with the baptismal pool also contains the pictures. The upper row has two that are recognisable. The first is Jesus healing the paralysed man let down through the roof. On the right is the man on his bed, on the left he is carrying his bed, and Jesus stands above. All three figures in the picture are dressed the same and are of the same size. They were drawn in black line on a white background, in a style that might be called 'naïve'. Jesus has no halo or anything to distinguish him from the other figures.

The second picture is of Jesus stilling the storm, and Peter then trying to walk on the sea. In the background various disciples watch from a large boat, while Jesus holds out his hand to Peter. All the figures are dressed similarly; in fact some of disciples in the ship have more elaborate clothes than Jesus! Unfortunately, the right-hand part was destroyed during the siege demolition.

On the lower level, the pictures on two walls seem to be covering the account of the women coming to the tomb on Easter morning. It is rather damaged, but shows at least three women in long dresses carrying bowls and torches as they approach an elaborate tomb. There are two big stars, one on each side of the tomb. Unfortunately the whole picture is badly damaged, but presumably shows most of the resurrection story.

On the opposite wall, there is a picture of a lady in a long dress drawing water from a well. The excavators thought this could be the woman Jesus met at the well in John 4. Two further additions are from Old Testament stories. One was of David cutting off Goliath's head but is only identifiable because someone has written 'David' and 'Goliath' over the badly damaged figures in Syriac. The other is a little vignette of Adam and Eve in the corner of the picture of the Good Shepherd behind the baptismal pool.

There are also various graffiti on the walls that deserve mention. Two mention people who may have been baptised, 'Proclus' and 'Siseon the humble.' There is also mention of an *episkopos* called Paul. One graffiti says defiantly 'There is one God in heaven.' And some think that various attempts to write out the Greek alphabet may have been charms to exorcise evil spirits.

### **What Can we Learn from the Folk at Dura? Six Things**

First, baptism was highly important and it was for believers, by immersion. Although it was the confessed faith that was essential. But since most who study early church history are either Roman Catholics or Anglicans or other paedobaptists, this emphasis on believer's baptism is not liked. There is also the folk-superstition about 'getting the baby done' that has to be challenged. The truth is that until 200 AD baptism was only for believers after a confession of faith (the amount of water could be varied according to practicalities—see the early 2nd-century *Didache*).

When the Dura church building was being converted, only babies likely to die were baptised, because of the fear that they would not be allowed into heaven. Around this time, when Novatian was trying to become bishop at Rome, it was held against him that he had only been baptised as a baby (because he was sickly). And, a generation before, Tertullian wrote against the practice of baptising children (not babies) on the grounds that it loaded them with too much responsibility.

Second, we need a proper view of Jesus—he was fully human. If you had met him in the street, you would not have noticed him until he did miracles. It was a bad day when artists started to depict Jesus as larger than his followers, or to give him a halo (as in the Hinton St Mary mosaic). In the 4th century, the battle over Jesus' deity resulted in the downplaying of his humanity. Then in the 5th century, you had the christological struggle between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius. It began with Nestorius' dislike of people calling the virgin Mary 'Mother of God.' The unscrupulous politician Cyril attacked him' as a heretic, and was backed by much popular veneration of Mary. Nestorius was condemned and exiled. His followers, especially in the Syriac-speaking churches around Antioch, were driven out of the Byzantine empire. They fled into Persia, and started a missionary movement that would spread to India and China.

Third, if I had my time over again, I would spend more of my time speaking about Jesus. Too often we allow the world to set its agenda for us. I have often been

horrified at how little Jesus gets mentioned on radio and TV. And compared with the leaders of other religions, he outranks them by miles. The folk at Dura would have been using the handy one-volume story of Jesus, the *Diatessaron* by Tatian. There were editions in both Greek and Syriac. We know that eventually it was translated into other languages. In the 4th century Ephrem Syrus wrote a commentary on it. And it was only later on in the 5th century that the separate gospels came into wide usage. The old advice 'Preach about Jesus, and about 30 minutes' is very apposite. The wall decorations show that the folk at Dura had Jesus at the centre, even for those who were illiterate. What about someone doing a *Diatessaron* for the 21st century?

Fourth, we should note that the folk at Dura were keen evangelists, otherwise they would not have spent their biggest effort in making their baptistery. They aimed to grow by conversions and built accordingly. And they used music too. The big names in 4th century Syriac Christianity were hymn-writers, Aphraat and Ephrem Syrus. Sadly we have no music for their songs (the earliest scrap of a hymn with musical notation is a Greek piece surviving as Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786). But after the condemnation of Nestorius, they withdrew to Mosul in Persian territory. While the Monophysites, Cyril of Alexandria's successors, tried to take over Byzantium, those influenced by Theodore the Interpreter and his pupils went east. They founded the still-surviving Mar Thoma Church of South India, as well as churches in the Mosul area, and extended eventually as far as China. It was only in the high Middle Ages that these

far eastern churches were extinguished by Ghengiz Khan and Tanberlane.

Fifth, these early Christians were well aware that they were in a battle against the powers of evil. With the military background of many church members they took on their enemies with determination—none of our modern syncretism. Faced with Persian Zoroastrians who believed in two equal and opposite forces the proclaimed defiantly ‘One God in heaven.’ There is only one Jesus in the healing of the paralysed man. There are only stars to represent angels, not figures. Their Jesus was utterly human and approachable, unlike the remote saviour of the Middle Ages, only accessible through the

ministrations of the virgin Mary and a growing plethora of ‘saints.’

Last, we should note that they could take on new ideas. The little vignette of Adam and Eve was probably added to the picture of the Good Shepherd to answer the question of ‘Why do we need saving?’ New translations into vernacular language such as Armenian should also be noted. And until fairly recently there were Nestorian monuments in China.

These are practical challenges which today’s churches need to heed. And if it means ditching some venerated practices, and rewriting some ‘church histories,’ why not?

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## Research into Baptist life

**Did you know that there is a free-access archive of all available past *bmj* issues, including its predecessor, *The Fraternal*?**

These journals provide a lens into the life of Baptist ministers and their churches back to 1907, and could help you in your research. Our friend Rob Bradshaw, librarian at Spurgeon’s College, scanned all the back issues that we have been able to locate and hosts them for us on Theology on the Web, which itself is an amazing resource and worth a look. The *bmj* archive does not include the most recent year or two, but is updated periodically.

You can find the archive here:

[https://theologyontheweb.org.uk/journals\\_baptist.html](https://theologyontheweb.org.uk/journals_baptist.html)





## Mykons

by John Edwards

*Author: John Edwards is now retired from Baptist ministry.*

When in 2003 I retired from full-time ministry, I wondered how I could combine my Bible study with an interest in painting. I turned to a game I had played, combining a series of eight cardboard shapes into semi-abstract representations of, for example, a dinosaur or an ice-cream sundae. I applied this to the 31 subjects of *Daily Prayer and Praise* by Bishop George Appleton (World Christian Books, Lutterworth Press), which takes us through the story of the Bible in a month.

This exercise has been followed by other series: Holy Week; the Sermon on the Mount; Revelation and passages in Luke;

Romans has seen me through much of the lockdown and now I am exploring messages from Isaiah. The first series can be found on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=a.159502892879976>

My method is to arrange the shapes for a theme, followed by a freehand drawing with coloured pencils. Then comes a full-sized A3 version with wax crayons, followed eventually by the oil painting on 12 x 16 in boards. By this time I feel I know the scripture theme fairly well!

I have set this down, not to commend my amateur artistic efforts, but as a suggestion which others might follow. I have given them the name 'Mykons' to emphasise the personal aspect which anyone might take up, with any or no artistic talent. The shapes have been used with children and of course other shapes could be used beside my eight.

Across is an example of a Mykon.

### **Let Mission Begin**

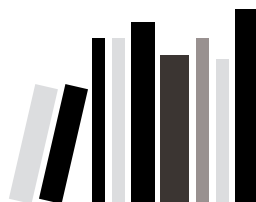
*Bible reading:* John 20:19-23. 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

*Meditation:* Once Christ has been lifted up on the cross the world mission can begin. On the evening of the day of resurrection, the Risen Lord sends his disciples forth with the gospel of forgiveness. He knows that they will have hardships and difficulties to face, so he breathes into them his own victorious Spirit.

Today, anywhere, anyone, any group, into whom Christ chooses to breathe his Spirit, can be a new centre for his outgoing mission. There is also a reminder of Jesus' other description of the increasing circles of his mission: 'But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

## reviews

edited by Michael Peat



### ***Faith facing Reality: Stirring up***

#### ***Discussion with Bonhoeffer***

*by John W. de Gruchy*

*Cascade Books, 2022*

#### ***Reviewer: Stephen Heap***

A book drawing on the work of two significant Christian thinkers and disciples, from the pen of one of them, and asking what it means to be Christian in the complexities of today's world, is likely to be a stimulating and challenging read. That is certainly the case with this book. Bonhoeffer and de Gruchy come

from different times and contexts but with things in common—not least that both sought to be Christian in situations of oppression. Bonhoeffer's context was Nazi Germany; de Gruchy's was apartheid South Africa. More personally for de Gruchy, the death of his son, Steven, aged 48, created a paradigm within which de Gruchy had to work out his obedience. In this book, de Gruchy sets out to use Bonhoeffer's work to 'stir up discussion of the important issues of life' (p3), a work Bonhoeffer himself urged on the church. De Gruchy does that successfully, but

he also does more. The book is about more than discussion; it is about living as Christians. It is a tool for discipleship and to be welcomed as such. .

All the chapters except the first, on *Faith and the Nature of Reality*, are based on already published material, 'thoroughly' (p6) revised. Chapter 1 sets the scene. The world faces 'apocalyptic times' (p9), including the 'most threatening reality' of global warming (p11). The word 'reality' is one much used by Bonhoeffer and de Gruchy. Facing the reality of the world, how it actually is, and the reality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, are key planks of discipleship. The cross is central to revealing God. It reshapes ideas of God away from ideas of 'divine omnipotence' (p28) towards a God on the side of the weak and powerless. The voices of all such in every generation must always be listened to as part of serving God. So serious is the call to obedience that all human faculties and all God has given must be used in its pursuit.

The chapters engage with major issues the world faces. The issues chosen are: 'colonial racism', power, 'scientism and soulless technology', Israel/Palestine, and the threats to life posed by, for example, pandemics. An epilogue movingly offers de Gruchy's reflections on facing death. A key Christian doctrine is brought alongside each issue; so, for example, the chapter on colonial racism becomes *Conversion and the Persistence of Colonial Racism*. Each chapter addresses the chosen issue in the light of doctrine, Bonhoeffer's work, de Gruchy's reflections, and what Bonhoeffer and de Gruchy faced in their own contexts. For example, the chapter, *Transcendence and the Will to Power* explores how in

individuals and the state the search for God can become the search to be god, a demonic will to power. Goethe's Faust, Mann's Dr Faustus, Nietzsche's philosophy, Nazism and apartheid are all referenced in the discussion, with links made to contemporary events in post-apartheid South Africa, Russia and the USA. The life of Jesus, the man 'who exists only for others' (p75, quoting Bonhoeffer), reveals another way, which Christians must seek to follow, though it will bring challenges and pain; something Jesus, Bonhoeffer and de Gruchy knew. Being Christian is a serious, difficult and important business in a world where hugely destructive powers do arise, causing immense suffering to millions. Just how serious becomes desperately clear in another chapter (6) where Bonhoeffer's own profound wrestling over the plot to kill Hitler, including his own involvement in it, is discussed.

With one exception (it seemed to this reviewer!), the chapters present clear, cogent arguments. That on 'scientism and soulless technology' seemed less clear and included claims which seem at best over-stated. An example is when, in arguing, fairly, that science alone cannot provide a basis for morality, de Gruchy says 'Science has no indisputable moral axioms' (p91). That is questionable. Is not a commitment to seeking truth part of doing science, and a moral axiom which all scientists being true to their discipline must follow? De Gruchy's main point that 'scientific understanding alone...cannot make our world more humane and just' (p101) stands, however. Other wisdoms are needed also, including theological ones.



Two important theological voices are raised in this book in a way which challenges and equips Christians for service in a world which does face major issues. It is well worth the read.

***Missional Acts: Rhetorical Narrative in the Acts of the Apostles***

by Daniel McGinnis

Pickwick, 2022

**Reviewer: Pieter J. Lalleman**

Bible stories are not (always) prescriptive for us—much happens in the Bible that the narrator passes onto his readers without commending it. Because Acts is a narrative, we cannot automatically assume that the characters do the right things all the time or that the stories set us examples. Daniel McGinnis' argument, however, is that Acts *is* a model for Christians. In McGinnis' view, Luke consciously describes the early Christian mission as an example for future generations, using skilled rhetoric in doing so. But McGinnis is no fundamentalist, as can be seen in the way he shows contrasts between Luke and other NT authors like Matthew and Paul.

The book began life as a doctoral dissertation, but this is a revised version aiming at a wider audience. It does not primarily focus on scholarly discussion and there is something devotional about the way in which the Book of Acts is discussed, which makes the book suitable for a wide readership.

The book is in four parts. Part 1 discusses 'missional stimuli in Acts,' which include the expansion of the Word (*Logos*), the empowerment of the Spirit, the Father's

universal offer of salvation, and a radical form of Christianity that develops the themes of Luke's gospel. These stimuli are compared to a human heart. Part 2 is about missional structures, the church assembly and the house church. These structures are compared to hands and feet. In part 3, Paul's missionary strategies are introduced and compared to the human brain. In this part McGinnis comments concisely on Acts 13:4–21:17, followed by a concluding chapter on Paul's missional strategy according to Acts. Part 4 is about missional suffering and here the author comments on Acts 21-28. These chapters, too, are presented as examples for Christians when they are persecuted, as Luke foresaw would happen. Missional suffering is likened to the human backbone. The summary has sermon-like qualities. Sixteen tables and some maps facilitate reading.

This whistle-stop tour of Acts does not exegete specific verses deeply, but will be useful for church leaders, Bible school teachers and preachers because it makes the book eminently relevant for the church. McGinnis describes Luke's intention to be equipping believers to face persecution, building a Christian identity and defending and rehabilitating Paul. All these are good things, yet some questions remain for me:

- can and should that unique individual Paul be a model for all times?
- should the church still have apostles?
- does Luke really commend fasting (84)?
- more generally, does Luke 'emphasise' or 'commend' something when he merely mentions it?

## ***Interrupting the Church's Flow***

by Al Barrett

SCM, 2020

**Reviewer: Ronnie Hall**

This is an academic textbook based on a PhD thesis. Realistically unless you have a good knowledge of the work of Graham Ward, Romand Coles and radical orthodoxy you will find this a struggle. For example, there are phrases like 'put the soma back into the sarx'. I had to refamiliarise myself with Milbank, the Nottingham method, and other parts of postmodern theology to give this book a fair review.

The book is written from the perspective of an area of urban deprivation in Birmingham. Until recently I worked in a similar area in Birmingham a few miles away so I could easily relate to the stories that are being told. It was interesting to see how the author used Graham Ward and Romand Coles to develop a political theology basically to say that areas of urban deprivation aren't for churches to 'solve' or 'do' from the outside, but the church is to be embedded in these areas to bring hope and listen to stories. Through the act of sacrament and particularly eucharist (it is written very much for Anglicans) the church and the individual can learn much about hospitality, receiving as much from the homeless person or the refugee or the person that is 'other'. Theologically this is achieved by the weaving the complexity of the abandonment of the cross and reaching back to the story of Mary and Martha at the anointing and the raising of Lazarus. It is actually quite a theological achievement and I had to go back a few times as the whole book is like

long periods of boredom with periods of theological excitement. As with any PhD thesis I'm absolutely not doing the whole book justice but it is a very complicated theology.

If a PhD thesis in postmodern theology in an urban setting is for you I can make one very clear recommendation when you read this book. Start with the appendix. The actual conversation the author had with Graham Ward did a lot of the theological work that is necessary to understand what is going on, especially when Romand Coles is actually a bit more accessible.

Overall I think this book belongs in a college library (and the price reflects that). However what I will recommend is the other book written by Al Barrett (with Ruth Harley) on the same topic, called *Being Interrupted*. If this is the theological foundation then *Being Interrupted* is the practical application.

Ed: *Being Interrupted* was reviewed in *bmj* in April 2023.

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