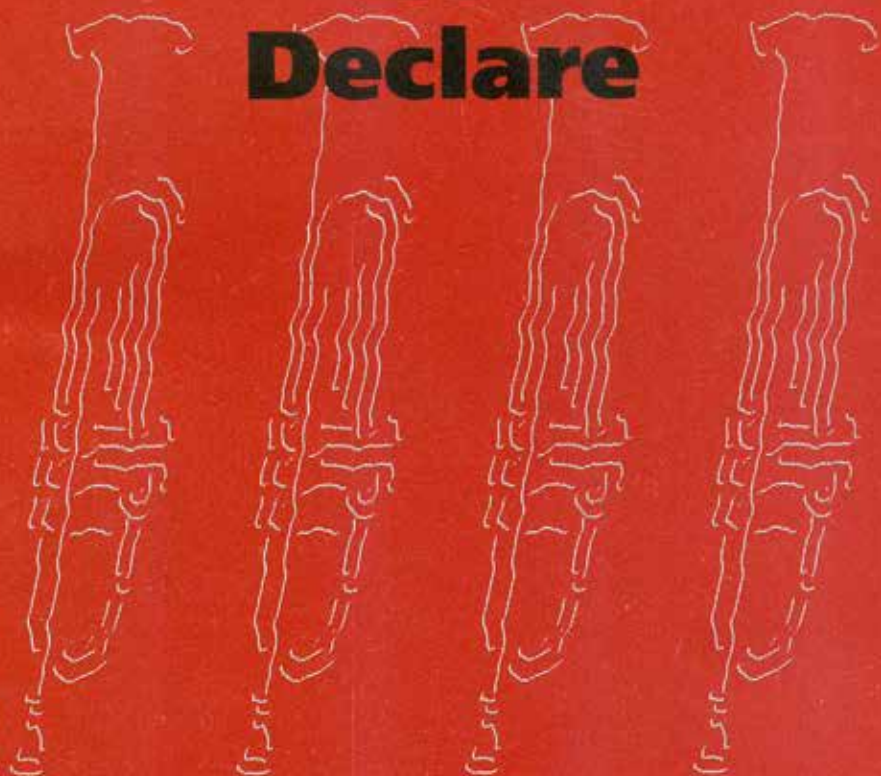


# **Something to Declare**



## **A study of the Declaration of Principle**

jointly written by the Principals of the four  
English Colleges in membership with the  
Baptist Union of Great Britain

Edited by:  
Richard L Kidd

# Something to Declare

**A Study of the Declaration of Principle  
of the Baptist Union of Great Britain**

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Whitley Publications

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ISBN 0-9528150-0-1

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Published by Whitley Publications  
c/o Regent's Park College  
Pusey Street  
Oxford  
Oxfordshire OX1 2LB  
England

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# Forward

by **David Coffey**

*(General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain)*

This booklet makes a major contribution to the current debate on Baptist identity and, whilst the thinking of all Baptists is valued, it is a significant offering when the Principals of the four English Colleges in membership with the Union write a modern exposition of the ‘Declaration of Principle’.

I suspect that many Baptists have never heard of the ‘Declaration of Principle’ and that a high percentage of accredited ministers rarely use it as a reference point, even though each one is required to sign it as the basis of the Union.

It is the conviction of the writers that in the year when the Denominational Consultation will address the question of the Baptist Union in the 21st century, this particular reflection on our identity is an essential study to be undertaken.

I welcome such a study to encourage clarity in the long-running debate between ‘Confessions’ and ‘Covenants’ and to contribute to the coherence we are seeking at a time of ferment, but most of all, because it establishes the vital link between spiritual vitality and theological enquiry.

These are days of great potential for Baptist Christians. There is a climate of expectancy that God could be preparing us for a major advance. We have not been plagued by spiritual decline in recent years; on the contrary, in so many spheres of Baptist life there are signs of life and growth.

Dorothy Sayers once said that the “... cultivation of religious emotion without philosophic basis is thoroughly pernicious.” She was speaking from her encounter with an anti-intellectual Evangelicalism. Our understanding of church history should be sufficient to persuade us that fresh movements of God’s Spirit must always be accompanied by theological revival otherwise what we are left with is a shallow piety.

Who can estimate the incalculable debt Baptists owe to the searching and enquiring mind of the 18th century pastor-theologian, Andrew Fuller. He was reared in a high calvinist context where it was believed that open evangelism did a disservice to God’s sovereignty. Yet by contact with other pastors such as

John Sutcliffe and Robert Hall and the influential writings of Jonathan Edwards, he challenged the deadening influence of high Calvinism on missions. His notable work *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* laid the foundations for 19th century missionary theology which profoundly influenced Baptist Missions worldwide.

We need another generation of pastor-theologians who will bring their own penetrating analysis to address how faithfully the Church of today is reflecting the nature and purposes of the missionary God, and what implications this may possess for a fresh understanding of covenant relationships in a Union of Baptists.

The ultimate purpose of the authors is to advance this debate.

# Editor's Introduction

These are highly creative days for Britain's Baptists. There has been a ferment of thinking, talking and doing over many months, and much of it will come to a focus at the Denominational Consultation in September 1996. As the General Secretaries have explained in the recent issues of *BaptistLeader* and *SecCheck*, (Winter 1995) much is at stake and, potentially, we have the possibility of laying strong foundations for our denominational life well into the next millennium.

Amongst the many new initiatives of recent years, one which began quietly some eighteen months ago, is a regular meeting of the Principals of the four English Colleges in membership with the Baptist Union: Bristol, Northern, Regent's Park and Spurgeon's. This came about for a variety of reasons: we are good friends and have come to value the personal and practical support we can offer each other in our various ministries; we share a strong commitment to the Baptist Union and are all determined to do our very best to secure its future, drawing on the rich and varied gifts represented by our respective Colleges.

From our earliest meetings, we were asking ourselves what distinctive contribution we might bring to the debates which are so much alive in our Union at this time. We have long been party to many discussions about Baptist identity, here and overseas; we have all made our various contributions to recent debates and documents on the Assembly, Baptism, Ministry, the Superintendency and so on; but we began to look for a way to pull these contributions together in a coherent way.

Out of lengthy conversations we began to realise that much which together we feel to be important can usefully be explored by a detailed examination of our Union's 'Declaration of Principle'; and the result is the booklet which you are about to read.

We have all previously found ourselves, in various contexts, arguing for a particular vision of a Baptist 'Union': one which is well described by the potent biblical concept of 'covenant'; and one which is open enough to embrace a wide variety of Christian perspectives, uniting around a strong Christ-centred framework of basic convictions directed towards authentic Christian discipleship and mission. We have also found ourselves frequently

and energetically challenged by those who do not share our enthusiasm for the language of covenant, and others who would like our Union to be defined by a much more exclusive 'Confession of Faith', greatly narrowing the breadth of our present denominational family.

As we have talked together and further researched this material, we have grown in the conviction that our existing Declaration of Principle - little known to many in our constituency, but formally signed by all accredited ministers as 'The Basis of this Union' - has still a great deal to offer. We all warm to the move initiated by the General Secretaries to think more deeply about the 'missionary God' and to focus our explorations through a so-called 'missiological prism'; and we think that our own contribution is consistent with this approach.

In exploring the background to the Declaration of Principle, therefore, and expounding its possible meanings, we seek to offer this small booklet as a contribution to the active search for a living Baptist identity in our time. We offer it as one amongst many resources for the Denominational Consultation and as a contribution to the continuing study of our denominational roots.

*Richard Kidd (April 1996)*



# **The Declaration of Principle**

(Revised 1938)

The Basis of this Union is:

1. That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.
2. That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who “died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day.”
3. That it is the duty of every disciple to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.

## **Section I**

# **BACKGROUND TO THE DEBATE**

# Baptists and Covenant

When the written responses to the recent document *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* were analysed, one clear focus of disagreement stood out; namely, its use of the term ‘covenant’ as a primary distinctive of Baptist identity. Two objections were heard particularly clearly. Firstly, that the term ‘covenant’ in its biblical usage is reserved only for a ‘vertical’ relationship between God and God’s people, whereas the way it was used in the *Assembly* document and the way we shall use it here both rely heavily on the idea of a ‘horizontal’ covenant relationship, person to person. Secondly, that historically, when Baptists have used the term ‘covenant’, it has been normal to associate it with a comprehensive ‘Confession of Faith’, a particular kind of ‘covenant document’; whereas the approach taken in the *Assembly* document and the approach we shall take here quite deliberately resist any attempt to create a detailed ‘Confession’ for this purpose.

These objections were voiced with energy and commitment, and our intention is to give them serious attention. As already suggested, we remain convinced that the ‘covenant’ word remains central in any historically convincing account of Baptist identity, and that it continues to have significant potential in the particular context of our day. It is clear, however, that we must begin this exploration of the Declaration of Principle with a clear statement about how we respond to the above objections; as our answers will offer a framework within which to understand how the Declaration can best serve the needs of our Union today, as a ‘Basis’ of our continuing covenant life.

## The ‘Vertical’ and the ‘Horizontal’

Concerning its biblical usage, it is true that at first sight the Bible does appear predominantly to use the term ‘covenant’ to speak of a ‘vertical’ relationship between God and God’s people. We speak of covenants made with Noah (Genesis 9), with Abraham (Genesis 15) and with Moses (Exodus 24); and we associate the promise of a ‘new covenant’ with the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31). In all these instances, however, the goal of God’s initiative in making covenant is the formation of a *people*; indeed, of a people covenanted together, as in the making of Israel. The most famous covenant formula is, “I shall be their God and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah

31:34). God's initiative in gracious love is the basis, the very possibility and vitality, of their relationships one with another, as well as of their direct relationship with God.

When it comes, then, to the making of a 'new covenant' through Christ, it is not at all surprising that the context in which this gains clearest expression is that of the communion meal, in which the 'vertical' initiative of God and the 'horizontal' bonds of fellowship are also *both* sharply in focus. The breaking of the body of Jesus and the shedding of his blood, which seal the new covenant and are the basis for the making of the Body of Christ, the new community, creates a people covenanted together one with another on the foundation of God's initiative in sacrificial love.

This biblical insight, it has been claimed, undergirded the highly creative theological developments in the late 16th and early 17th centuries which provided Baptists with one of their first and most striking focal points for identity: something which clearly set them apart from other strongly hierarchical churches of the time. Barrie White in his *The English Separatist Tradition* tells how, as the early Separatist communities marked out their identity in contrast to a hostile state and church, it was most often the covenant promise which bound such communities together and to God. At the heart of the covenant was a form of words which usually included a phrase like, "... to walk with each other and with God"; and the promise was not taken lightly but signified the kind of commitment which might even culminate in a martyr's call.

It is clear, however, that a number of early Baptists, and most notably John Smyth, ran with this simple formula to provide a far more comprehensive and highly distinctive theological foundation for Baptist identity. Smyth put to work precisely the dynamic relationship which we have identified between the vertical and the horizontal in order to defend the Baptists' distinctive view of 'authority' in the local church community. The argument goes like this: it is only those who are horizontally covenanted to each other, even if only two or three in number, who embody and make actual the authority of Christ, with whom each is individually covenanted in the (vertical) grace of redemption. In other words, recalling again the context of the communion meal, it is only as God covenants authoritatively with each believer, that the believing community discovers its own particular authority under Christ.

This is so fundamental to our roots as Baptists, indeed so essential to our

most distinctive theological emphasis on the priority of the local community for the mission of the Gospel, that it is vital we re-appropriate it and build on it in our own day. This need not, of course, be to the neglect of other important New Testament words associated with 'being church'; terms like 'body' and 'fellowship' are also needed to provide a complete picture, but 'covenant' must surely remain uniquely significant for Baptists.

So far, however, we have only distinguished ourselves from those hierarchical communions which tend to locate authority in leadership rather than in their common life. To establish the distinctive identity of Baptists we also need to say why we are distinct from Congregationalists and other Independents who share our roots in the Separatist tradition; and this is where a further creative use of the covenant language becomes very significant. From their earliest days Baptists wanted to say that they also belonged together beyond the tight boundaries of the local congregation; and so, whilst in no way limiting all that is rightly said about the freedom and ability of the local congregation to seek and discover the mind of Christ, they committed themselves to each other in Association.

A similar covenant language occurs again at the level of the Association: a typical formula being, "... to walk together and to watch over each other". This is not to say that others beyond the local community are 'better Christians' or 'more authoritative' than those within it, but it is to say that there is a proper humility, by which all Christians submit themselves to listen attentively to how the Spirit is speaking to them. It should not be entirely surprising if this speech sometimes comes from beyond the 'normal' means: be that dramatically, as Peter once spoke at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) or, more mundanely, as Baptists listen to a variety of companions who speak to them from beyond the boundaries of the local congregation. This is surely no more than to honour the proper freedom of the Spirit.

Now it is true that covenant terminology has not traditionally been used explicitly in any significant measure to describe the Baptist Union itself; one of the bold and, we think, creative suggestions in the Assembly document is that what has long been implicit is there brought more clearly into view. The impetus to do this is the fact that the Union already includes, amongst others, churches and Associations which are themselves best described in covenant terms.

To speak of the Baptist Union in the language of covenant does require a

further, but we think consistent, theological development. We are being misunderstood, however, if the impression is given that covenant language can simply be applied with a standard meaning at every level: local church, Association and Union. Its application to the local church will always be for Baptists quite unique, as is symbolised by the distinctively binding nature of decisions in the Church Meeting. Our claim is that the covenant concept is differently appropriate at each level and, at Union level, is a creative way of naming the important contribution that the wider commitment makes to the local congregation, and vice versa. We are not simply voluntary members of a 'take it or leave it' Union. We are bound together by a common vision and by the mutual commitments of fellowship.

## The Form of the 'Covenant Document'

There is, however, also the second objection; namely, that covenants always were, and therefore still need to be, accompanied by a 'covenant document' in the form of a 'Confession of Faith'. It is undoubtedly true that, as the earliest Baptist congregations covenanted together in Association, typically they did so in connection with a Confession of Faith (as, for example, the famous 'London' Baptist Confession of 1644, quoted in the *Assembly* document). Perhaps it should not be surprising that an extensive Confession was felt to be necessary in the earliest days as identity first took shape against a background of intense opposition; but it is clear that such documents became less and less significant as the years went by.

If we move on from a consideration of Associations and look at the formation of the Baptist Union itself, an interesting pattern begins to emerge. Initially the 'Basis' of Union, adopted in 1813, bore considerable similarity to earlier Particular Baptist Confessions. By the end of the 19th century, however, with the formal amalgamation of the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists of the New Connexion (1891), the approach was very different. Indeed it was precisely as the Downgrade controversy was reaching its height, and it would have been all too easy for the factions to part and go their separate ways under different 'Confessions', that the much more 'open' Declaration of Principle was introduced (1873), and then progressively refined (1904, 1906 and 1938). The Declaration, it becomes clear, was designed to hold together in covenant a wide Baptist family, rather than to create the kind

of boundaries, more typically associated with a Confession, which largely serve to hold people apart. It is this story and its implications which we want to trace more carefully in the following pages.

We are certainly of a mind that today it would be a retrograde step to initiate a new search for a Confession of Faith as a 'covenant document'; this would only serve to fragment and undo the creative vision of our predecessors who worked so carefully to bind us together. Theologically we want to say that, in the making of covenant, be it at Sinai, Calvary or in the present day, the text is always secondary to the relationship, the 'covenant document' subordinate to the covenant promise. There is clearly the possibility of making the Declaration of Principle work for us as a denomination more effectively than it does at this moment, but this will require more studied attention and exposition, as we are attempting here, rather than replacement by a lengthy Confession.

## A Strategy for Identity and Mission

Our claim is that, at the end of the day, the language of 'covenant' is still full of potential to enable Baptists to clarify, for themselves and for others, a distinctive way of 'being church', which is neither independent nor hierarchical. This, we suggest, is our proper theological identity within the plethora of communions in the modern world, and covenant language is a very powerful factor in its expression. *We are 'inter-dependents', not 'independents'; and we locate authority in community, not in hierarchy.*

It was the genius of our parents in the faith to envision such a way of 'being church'. It is a vision which still carries a prophetic word for churchly and other communities in our time, and the language of 'covenant' is still the best and theologically most consistent focus around which to be gathered, and on which to build our future strategies for mission.

# **“The Basis of this Union ...”**

Everything that grows needs structure and organisation. A body cannot grow without a skeleton; nor can ICI, Sainsburys or the BBC flourish without an organisation. While it is the case that sometimes the organisation or the bureaucracy can take over and become an end in itself, the fundamental reality remains unchanged; every living organism needs organisation.

## **In the Beginning**

So it was that in 1792, when some Baptists became convinced that God was calling them to missionary endeavour they formed a Society to make the vision possible. Those were days when many Baptists were aware that they were living in times of creative change. New theological reflections called for new structures that gave expression to God’s calling. Theology, fellowship, mission, structure all went together in the purposes of God.

Twenty years later, at a meeting in London a number of Baptists ...

... resolved that a more general union of the Particular Baptist Churches in the United Kingdom is very desirable ... (and that) the objects of the Association be the promotion of the cause of Christ in general; and the interest of the denomination in particular; with a primary view to the encouragement and support of the Baptist Mission.

Further meetings were called, leading to a gathering on the 23rd June 1813 where 45 ministers present adopted the first Constitution of the Union. The first resolution of the Constitution read:

That this Society of ministers and churches be designated ‘The General Union of Baptist Churches’ maintaining the important doctrines of three equal persons in the Godhead; eternal and personal election; original sin; particular redemption; free justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; efficacious grace in regeneration; the final perseverance of real believers; the resurrection of the dead; future judgement; the eternal happiness of the righteous, and the eternal misery of such as die in impenitence, with the congregational order of the Churches inviolably.

These are the calvinistic doctrines of Particular Baptists. They are unexceptional as such but clearly were intended here to identify who could be members and who would not be acceptable in such a Union. At this early stage



a doctrinal position was clearly being set forth as the 'Basis of Union'.

The purpose of the formation of the Union was expressed as ..... the means of becoming better acquainted with each other, with a view to excite brotherly love, and to furnish a stimulus for a zealous cooperation in promoting the cause of Christ in general, and particularly in our own denomination, and especially to encourage and support our missions.

It is significant that this was seen as a Union of ministers and churches to foster a deeper sense of fellowship amongst the ministers as well as the churches.

The Constitution recommended to the churches the support of the BMS, such Colleges as were in existence, the Particular Baptist Fund and other Baptist agencies.

Item 10 of the Constitution read as follows:

... that this Society disclaims all manner of superiority and superintendence over the churches; or any authority or power, to impose anything upon their faith and practice; their sole intention is to be helpers together one of another, in promoting the common cause of Christianity, and the interests of several churches of the denomination to which they belong.

## A Second Attempt

It is a sad matter of fact that after this initial enthusiasm the churches experienced a decline for the decade 1820-1830. An important first step had been taken, however, towards a national Baptist identity. The coming into being of the Union was seen mostly in terms of how that mission work should be supported and extended through a community of ever-deepening fellowship between churches and ministers.

A second attempt at a Constitution was made at the annual meeting on the 17th June 1835. The first resolution read as follows:

... that a more general union of the Baptist Churches throughout the United Kingdom is very desirable; it being fully recognized that every separate Church has, within itself, the power and authority to exercise all ecclesiastical discipline, rule and government, and to put in execution all the laws of Christ necessary to its own edification.

The Constitution then went on to identify a number of 'Objects of the Union'. The first two read:

1. To extend brotherly love and union among those Baptist Ministers and Churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated Evangelical.
2. To promote unity of exertion in whatever may best serve the cause of Christ in general, and the interests of the Baptist denomination in particular.

Comparing this with the earlier meetings reveals immediately that the list of doctrines has disappeared. Instead we have the phrase "... those who agree in the sentiments usually denominated Evangelical." At a time when General and Particular Baptists were already coming together, it may well be that this marks the beginning of a move away from the emphasis on a doctrinal position towards an emphasis on greater inclusiveness. It is also worth noting that there was no direct reference to the BMS within this Constitution.

As the century developed there was a growing self consciousness amongst British Baptists. Attendance grew at meetings of the Assembly and the kind of projects that ministers and churches were coming to see might best be served by a national body included financial support for weaker churches, pension provision for retired ministers, and a greater vigour in church planting.

The coming together of General and Particular Baptists had yet to be accomplished but it is clear that the changed 'Basis of Union' from a more narrowly conceived Particular Baptist stance to one that would welcome those of other theological persuasions, albeit denominated Evangelical, enabled and encouraged such growth in fellowship and mission.

## A Growing National Identity

Through much of the 19th century, therefore, the Union as a national body took higher profile. There were calls for the appointment of a full time Secretary, realised in 1877. It was apparent in the late 1860s that some further important revision of the Constitution had to be undertaken. A revised draft of a new Constitution was presented in 1872 and there followed an important debate on the question of whether or not there should be a 'Confession of Faith'. Although the convenor of the committee required to revise the Constitution argued for such a Confession the membership as a whole did not agree. Eventually the new Constitution was brought to the Assembly in London on the 28th April 1873 where, after two days of discussion, it was approved. For the first time there was a Declaration of Principle which read:

... in this Union it is fully recognized that every separate Church has liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ, and that the immersion of Believers is the only Christian baptism.

Also for the first time, a distinction was made between the Declaration of Principle and the so-called 'Objects of the Union'. On this occasion six Objects were stated, as follows:

1. To cultivate among its own members respect and love for one another, and for all who love the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. To afford opportunities for Conference, for the public declaration of opinion and for joint action on questions affecting the welfare of the churches and the extension of the denomination, both at home and abroad.
3. To promote fraternal correspondence between Baptists in this and other countries.
4. To obtain accurate information respecting the organizations, labours, and sufferings of Baptists throughout the world.
5. To confer and cooperate with other Christian Communities as occasion may require.
6. To maintain the right of all men everywhere to freedom from disadvantage, restraint, and taxation in matters purely religious.

Not all were convinced by the wisdom of the new Constitution. C H Spurgeon was one among a number who were dismayed at the removal of the doctrines recorded in the 1813 Constitution, let alone the reference in the 1835 Constitution to "... those Baptist Ministers and Churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated Evangelical." But the Declaration of Principle was in no sense proposed as the equivalent of a doctrinal statement. Those who were critical saw it as a further sign of either the Union's doctrinal indifference, or its unwisdom in being as inclusive as possible. The fact is that the increased inclusivity of the Constitution meant that the formal amalgamation of Particular Baptists and General Baptists of the New Connexion in 1891 was hastened. Although there may not have been much to divide these groups towards the end of the 19th century, nonetheless the Constitution enabled their swifter amalgamation. The desire for Union must itself have been very strong, certainly strong enough to resist the arguments of the Baptist with the highest national profile.

### **'The Great Commission' (Matthew 28:18-20)**

In 1904 yet further revisions of the Constitution and one significant change which was accepted readily involved the expansion of the Declaration of Principle. J H Shakespeare is reported as arguing that:

... we have the endeavour to bring that into closer harmony with the great commission of our Lord. The whole of this 'Declaration of Principle' is based upon those words Christ gave to His Disciples when He left them. We have added an important sentence under the definition of baptism ... in a third clause we have added what surely should have been in our 'Declaration of Principle' before, '... that it is the duty of every Disciple to be a personal witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to take part in the evangelization of the world.'

From this point on, the threefold pattern of The Great Commission, authority, baptism and mission becomes a clear hall mark of Baptist identity.

The full text of the Declaration of Principle in the 1904 Constitution read therefore:

The Basis of this Union is:

1. That our Lord Jesus Christ 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 to interpret and administer His Laws.
2. That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who "died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day."
3. That it is the duty of every disciple to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.

This is the first time in the section of the Constitution of the Baptist Union on the Declaration of Principle that the phrase 'The Basis of this Union' is actually used.

There were also amendments to Clause 4, the Objects of the Union. These were affirmed as:

1. To cultivate among its own members respect and love for one another and for all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. To spread the Gospel of Christ by employing Ministers and Evangelists, by establishing Christian Churches, by forming Sunday Schools, by distributing the Scriptures, by the issue of religious publications, and by such other methods as the Council shall deem advisable.
3. To afford opportunities for conference, and for united action on questions affecting the welfare of the churches and the extension of the denomination, both at home and abroad.

4. To afford opportunities for the declaration of opinion upon public questions.
5. To promote fraternal correspondence between Baptists in this and in other countries.
6. To obtain accurate information respecting the organizations, labours, and sufferings of Baptists throughout the world.
7. To confer and cooperate with other Christian Communities as occasion may require.
8. To maintain the right of all men everywhere to freedom from disadvantage, restraint, and taxation in matters purely religious.

## Further Theological Debate

Correspondence with the Baptist Union of Ireland in 1906 raised questions about the content of the Declaration of Principle. Shakespeare reported to the General Purposes Committee that a letter had been received requesting that the words “Our God and Saviour” be added to the first clause immediately after the phrase “Our Lord Jesus Christ”. It was claimed that if this change were made it was likely that as many as 34 Baptist churches in Ireland, presently outside the Union, would decide to become members. The request was met. The revised opening words of the first section of the Declaration of Principle then read: “That the Lord Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour, is the sole and absolute authority ...” Sadly, this did not lead to many more churches from Ireland joining the Union.

Eventually there was to be another thorough revision of the Constitution of the Union and this was given approval at the May Assembly in Leeds in 1926. There were no changes to the Declaration of Principle. The addition of 1906 was simply accepted. There was a change in the Objects of the Union, Clause 4, with the removal of any suggestion of the ‘employing’ of ministers and evangelists. There was also an inclusion under the Objects of the Union undertaking Trusteeship of Church and denominational property.

A flurry of interest surrounding the Declaration of Principle began at the 1934 March Council meeting. These were days still warmed by the controversy following the publication of T R Glover’s pamphlet *Fundamentals*. There had also been controversy some years earlier in the BMS following criticism of the work of George Howells. At Council M E Aubrey reported that Howells had written seeking to express his intention to table at the Assembly a notice of motion by which the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Principle should become: “That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Son of God Incarnate, is the

sole and absolute authority ...” A sub-committee was called into being to reflect on this, Howells himself being a member. The result of the committee’s labours was the suggestion that if there was to be any change to the wording it should be: “That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority ...”

That these phrases became part of a notice of motion to the Assembly for a change in the Declaration of Principle was moved in Council in the Spring of 1936. J B Middlebrook also gave notice of his suggestion to include the addition of another phrase within the same clause to make it read: “... and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.” These revisions were recommended by the Baptist Union Council to the Assembly and were adopted in 1938. This appears to have been one of the few times when there was an earnest *theological* issue at stake in discussing and formulating the Declaration of Principle.

The Declaration of Principle has remained unchanged from that time onwards. There were, however, changes to the Objects of the Union. As presently stated, the Objects of the Union are:

1. To cultivate among its own members respect and love for one another and for all who love the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. To spread the Gospel of Christ by Ministers and Evangelists, by establishing Churches, forming Sunday Schools, distributing the Scriptures, issuing religious publications, and by such other methods as the Council shall determine.
3. To afford opportunities for conference, and for united action on questions affecting the welfare of Churches, the support of the Ministry and the extension of the denomination both at home and abroad.
4. To promote fraternal relations between Baptists in this and other countries.
5. To obtain and disseminate accurate information respecting the organizations, labours, and sufferings of Baptists throughout the world.
6. To confer and cooperate with other Christian Communities as occasion may require.

This differs from the 1926 form of the Constitution in three respects. The reference to Trusteeship has been removed, that being now the work of the Baptist Union Corporation. More interestingly there has also been the removal of reference to “... the opportunities for the declaration of opinion upon public questions” and “... to maintain the right of all men everywhere to freedom

from disadvantage, restraint, and taxation in matters purely religious.” Moreover, some time in the early 1950s, the preamble to the Objects of the Union was introduced in the following form:

... the objects of the Union are the advancement of the Christian religion, especially by means of and in accordance with the principles of the Baptist Denomination (this being the main purpose) and the following objects so that these objects are ancillary to the main purpose and not so as to extend the objects of the Union beyond such main purpose.

These words have a distinctly legal ‘feel’ to them and may well relate to changes in Charity Law.

## The Status of the Declaration

The record shows that the Declaration of Principle, as the ‘Basis of this Union’, had become increasingly inclusive and less exclusive in its content and spirit. But what is the status of the Declaration? It can hardly be recognised as a Confession of Faith, but then it was not drawn up to that purpose. What we need to ask is, “What does it mean to say that this is the ‘Basis of this Union’?”

The section which follows will examine each of the three clauses individually, but for the moment let us take the Declaration whole. It may not be a Confession of Faith but it is none the less notably theological and identifies an authentic expression of Baptist ecclesiology. We cannot fail but notice its crucial trinitarian reference to baptism as baptism into the life of God, and its christological emphasis on the absolute authority of Jesus Christ. The ‘Basis’ is thereby much more than a statement of organisational policy pragmatically to achieve certain ends. We further note the decision to use the word ‘Union’ rather than ‘Society’ when speaking of the churches together. Implicit in this was the significance of being together in Christ in the purposes of the triune God which amounted to more than just creating an organisation. It is clear that the Union came into being in response to the BMS and its need for support but it also arose as an expression of fellowship between ministers and churches. In this sense there is a great deal of difference between belonging to a Trade Union, the Scripture Union or the Baptist Union. It is a matter of fellowship together in the purposes of the triune God.

The Declaration of Principle, by affirming first the absolute authority of

Jesus Christ, stresses that the Basis of our life personally and corporately is what God has done and is doing for us. No attempt is being made to lay the foundations for a national church (!) although this is still an accusation levelled at those who offer energy and commitment to the work of the Union. Implied in this Declaration is the authentic Baptist conviction that any Church is brought into being by the gracious call of God. So the Church is built on the one foundation that God laid, that is Jesus Christ to whom all authority is given. This in no sense allows for the possibility of there being 'The Baptist Church' but because the call of the gracious God is put first Baptists acknowledge that we are part of The Church; not *a* church, but *the* church in all its several congregations. In other words the unity of the Church of Christ is not in an organisation, or an hierarchy, but in the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Hence the Declaration's strong christological core, the Basis of this Union being declared to be a person, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh. That fundamental statement is not about identifying who is in and who is out but emphasises the unspeakable grace of God, the Christlike God, who has spoken in Holy Scripture but who remains forever beyond our words to contain.

We believe that the Declaration, as it stands, is an important affirmation. We have no desire to change it but wish that it be better known and understood because we believe something important is here for our present and future life. The Declaration clearly proclaims the basis of our congregational and denominational life as being in the triune God, our Creator, Saviour, and Source of transforming grace. We would argue that far from weakening the theology of the Union, as some suggested in the nineteenth century controversies, the Declaration in fact strengthens it by asserting the one clear centre, Jesus Christ. This may not suit those who would wish for more. We would encourage them to write their Confession of Faith but not to try and foist it on others, let alone make such human works the Basis of this Union.

By Christ, in the Spirit, we come to the Father. We are baptised into the life of the triune God and live to share God's mission. The Declaration is not enough for a Confession of Faith but it is enough to remind us that we are the church because God sought and found us in covenant grace. Our fellowship, therefore, in God is a gift and we bless the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.





## **Section II**

# **THE DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLE**

# The Question of Authority

Clause 1 of the Declaration of Principle reads:

*That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.*

## The Authority of Jesus Christ

The Declaration begins where we must always begin, with Jesus Christ who is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the A and the Z of the alphabet of faith. This very first sentence addresses the source of our authority for what we believe and the way we live, and it affirms that "... our sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice" is Jesus Christ. It recalls the words of Jesus about himself in Matthew 28:18: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ..."

That is, our final authority is a *person*, Jesus Christ. It is not a book, nor a creed, nor even a basis of faith - but a *person* in whom God expresses himself fully: "Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh." This is an affirmation that reaches back into the fine old Baptist phrase, 'the crown rights of the Redeemer'.

It strikes exactly the same note as did a declaration that was made in the life of another group of churches some thirty years later than the Baptist Union Declaration, and a comparison shows the critical importance of getting our focus right in the question of authority. In the emergency situation of the rise of Hitler in the 1930s, the Confessing Church in Germany wrote the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) as its manifesto of resistance against the seductions of Nazi Christianity. In what was being called 'German Christianity', Hitler was being celebrated as mediator of a new revelation and the Nazi flag stood next to the altar. In the face of this idolatry the makers of the *Barmen Declaration* affirmed:

Jesus Christ, as he is witnessed to in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to obey in life and death.

The common thread between the two Declarations is that Jesus Christ comes

first, and the Bible *witnesses* to this Christ. The authorities are in that order.

The Baptist Union Declaration states that our sole authority is “Jesus Christ ... as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.” The theologian who was largely responsible for the wording of the *Barmen Declaration*, Karl Barth, puts it like this: “Revelation is the Person of God speaking.” He goes on to say that the Bible may certainly be called the ‘Word of God’, but in the derivative sense that it testifies to the Word of God who is Christ.

Now, this phrase of the Declaration makes us different from some other evangelicals who have statements of faith that typically include the clause: “Our final authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice is *the Bible*.” The thinking of others seems to be that the Bible is the final authority because it is the writing that witnesses to Christ. The view taken by our Baptist parents who gave us the Declaration is the other way round: our final authority is Jesus Christ, to whom the Bible witnesses. Of course, as Baptists we certainly do not downgrade the scriptures. We have always honoured the Bible as the Spirit-inspired gift of God to his people, the reliable place where we can expect to hear the living Word of God. But we read it and we interpret it, with the help of the Holy Spirit, as witness to the one who is the Word of God in the fullest sense, Jesus Christ. If you ask, “who is this Jesus?” then he is not anyone’s view of Jesus. He is the Jesus Christ revealed in the pages of Scripture, as the Declarations of Barmen and the Baptist Union both make clear, so that Scripture is indispensable to knowing Christ. But Scripture always serves the authority of Christ. As Jesus himself says in John’s Gospel to the Pharisees, the great Bible students of their time:

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; but they witness to me, and you refuse to come to me that you may have life.  
(John 5:39)

Baptists have played a leading part in this century in the development of biblical scholarship. This is surely due to the Baptist understanding of the nature of Scripture, as indicated in this Declaration. On the one hand, Baptists are deeply interested in the study of the Bible, since they expect to find the Word of God as they read it. Perhaps this is why Baptists have contributed so notably to Old Testament scholarship over the last hundred years; unlike others, they have taken the Old Testament seriously as witness to the Word who is Christ. But on the other hand, Baptists have felt free to use the tools of

critical scholarship to explore the cultural situation in which Scripture was written, and to discover what the authors really meant to say in the context of the demands and the problems of their own time. Because Scripture is the inspired witness to the Word of God, we can use our minds to discover the way that this Word came to people in their own time and place, and so how it can come alive for us in our day.

This first clause makes clear, then, that our final authority is Jesus Christ. The content and character of his Lordship is spelled out in a phrase which was added in the final revision of the Declaration in the Baptist Union Assembly of 1938: Christ is 'God manifest in the flesh'. This dynamic account of the presence and unveiling of God in Christ helpfully replaces a first attempt at a definition of the divinity of Jesus; in 1906 the description 'Our God and Saviour' had been added after the words 'Our Lord Jesus Christ'. The final version is better, first because it is more clearly trinitarian, pointing to the relationship between the Father and the Son in the eternal fellowship of God. Second, the word 'manifest' makes a good connection with the phrase 'as revealed in the Holy Scriptures'. That is, God is manifest in Christ, and Christ is manifest to us in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ is the final authority because in him God is made visible in flesh and blood, and this new reality is revealed to us through the Scriptures. So the revelation of God at one point in history is recalled in the testimony of Scripture, and we can enter into the revelation again in the present as we encounter this same Christ.

We can do no better in summing up this bold declaration of the authority of Christ than to repeat some words of Charles Spurgeon, in his very first sermon as pastor in the new Metropolitan Tabernacle in London (1861):

I would propose that the subject of the ministry in this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist ... I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist ... but if I am asked to say what is my creed, I must reply, "It is Jesus Christ." My venerated predecessor, Dr Gill, has left a 'Body of Divinity' admirable and excellent in its way, but the 'Body of Divinity' to which I would pin and bind myself for ever, God helping me, is not his system of divinity or any other human treatise, but Jesus Christ, who is the sum and substance of the gospel; who is in himself all theology, the incarnation of every precious truth, the all-glorious personal embodiment of the way, the truth and the life.

## A Prophetic Word

Those readers who are not very interested in history may skip this next section, but others may want to know something of the story of how this statement of the authority of Christ came about among Baptists a hundred years ago. It is a story that still speaks to us today. The story has already been told in some detail in an earlier section, but here we highlight the strand which concerns the question of authority.

The words of Charles Spurgeon are quoted above, because they truly represent the thinking of this great preacher and church-planter, and show him in the end to be in accord with the decisions of the Baptist Union of his time, despite his own act of separation from it. Spurgeon withdrew from the fledgling Baptist Union in 1888, and gave as one reason for his action that the new Union had no proper doctrinal basis. He clearly would have liked the Union to have adopted a full Confession of Faith. At the time of his withdrawal, the Union did not have the present Declaration of Principle. It had the much shorter form of Declaration, written in 1873, and we can agree with Spurgeon that this was a quite inadequate statement. It had only two short phrases, recognising the liberty of the local church and the nature of baptism as the immersion of believers. But the Council of the Baptist Union, faced with Spurgeon's challenge, decided not to go the way of adopting a comprehensive Confession of Faith, but rather to re-make the existing Declaration with a proper christological heart. So the Council of the Baptist Union put a new version of the Declaration in front of the Assembly at Derby in October 1903, with the first clause simply and dramatically as follows:

The sole and absolute authority of our Lord Jesus Christ in all matters pertaining to faith and practice.

Other matters in hand concerning the newly-born Union prevented the adoption of this Declaration in 1903, but when it came before the Assembly in 1904 in an expanded form it was unanimously adopted. More revision and expansion was to happen before the form appeared as we know it today, but the setting out of the authority of Christ as the theme of the first principle might be claimed to be truly prophetic. In 1888 a small group of senior Council Members had hastily put together a statement of doctrines which were 'commonly believed by the Churches of the Union' in an attempt to persuade Spurgeon and others (unsuccessfully, as it happened) that the Union did hold

to evangelical principles. Yet it seems that the Council in 1903 deliberately chose not to tread this path. In these opening years of a Union which had only been formalised as recently as 1891, it chose to begin with Christ. Other beliefs could flow from this, but the word which the new Union must speak was the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It was as prophetic a word as Spurgeon himself had spoken at the beginning of his ministry in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and with exactly the same theme.

It is not too imaginative to suppose that the founders of our Union saw that the place to begin was with a vision of God. It was not an easy decision to make in the light of the upheavals among the churches in which the Union was born, a controversy far more disturbing and divisive than any that has rocked our family of churches in our own day. The strongest motive behind the forming of the Union had been to enable the churches to engage more effectively in mission at home, following the example of the Baptist Missionary Society overseas. The basis for this missionary union was not to be a comprehensive statement of beliefs which might exclude some who could not follow a particular form of words, but rather a vision of the missionary God who was made manifest in Christ.

## The Liberty of the Local Church

We have seen that the largest part of this first clause gives us two sources of authority - Christ and the Scriptures, but in that order. The sentence moves on to a third kind of authority, very much in third place - that of the local church gathered together. Each congregation has the 'liberty' of seeking to seek to find the mind of Christ for itself; it has the right and the privilege to discern the purpose of Christ for its life and witness.

In our tradition, this liberty is exercised in the Church Meeting. The real aim of this Meeting is not then to make majority decisions, though it is perfectly right to safeguard our freedom through a democratic process. Nor is the aim for one block of voters to oppress and dominate another. The point is to find together the mind of Christ, humbly to search for his purpose with the help of the Scriptures, but also confident of his risen presence among us as the Lord of his church.

It may seem odd that the Declaration has chosen to use the word 'laws' to describe what the church discovers as it is guided in its search by the Holy Spirit: it has 'liberty to interpret and administer His Laws'. This evidently

refers to the teaching of Christ in the Gospels, yet the Christ revealed there does not appear to be teaching a new set of rules, but rather pointing his listeners towards the character of God his Father, and to the demands that this holy, loving and just God lays upon us. It is not possible to confine these eternal demands in the particular limited form of words that we usually think of when we use the term 'law', though guidelines are essential for us. Laws are necessary in a human society, but will always need to be revised, in order not to lose the force of God's demands in new ages. Jesus himself treats the laws written in the Old Testament like this ("It was said to those of ancient times ... but I say to you": Matthew 8:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). We ought then to understand the phrase 'His Laws' in the Declaration as something like 'His purposes and demands on our lives'.

But then Jesus himself uses the word 'law' in this very way, re-defining it for his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). He lays upon us the law of love, which also implies the demand to do what is just (Matthew 22:36-40). Understanding 'law' like this makes the choice of the word quite appropriate in the Declaration, and it also reminds us of the related idea of 'covenant', which has already been explored in the opening section as a Baptist way of describing the binding together of a fellowship of believers.

So the local church is governed by Christ, present among his people through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church Meeting. This first sentence does not then set out the 'independence' of the local church, as is often suggested. It sets out the direct dependence of the local church on Christ, and the freedom of every church to find what this dependence means for its life. Nothing can therefore be imposed on the local Church Meeting by other churches or assemblies of churches; it has this liberty to find the mind of Christ. It has the freedom always to test what is proposed to be the purpose of Christ.

But Baptist churches have always gladly affirmed that they need the counsel and insight of other Christian congregations to use their freedom properly. They have been humble enough to admit that they need the help of others to find the mind of Christ. Baptist churches have always lived in spiritual inter-dependence with each other in Associations - and for the last 100 years, in a national Union. The key word in the Declaration about the local church is thus not 'autonomy' or 'independence' but 'liberty'.



It may be said that this first sentence is inadequate as a statement of Baptist identity because it says nothing about Association or Union life. Apparently it only speaks of the local church, not churches together. But this is to miss the whole point of putting Christ first. Our first authority is the person of Christ, and the whole Church Universal is his Body in the world (Ephesians 1:22-23). The church in every time and place, its members in glory and its members on earth, the whole company of the saints and apostles: this is the Body of Christ, and the local congregation can also be called the Body of Christ because it manifests the whole. Because it does make visible the Body of Christ in one place it cannot be imposed upon or dictated to. Since Christ makes himself present in his Body, the local congregation has the liberty and responsibility to interpret the mind of Christ. But if its aim is to find that mind it will seek fellowship, advice and counsel from as much of the whole Body as it can relate to. It will associate and unite with others, not just for the convenience of getting a job done, but because Christ is calling it to covenant with others. The 'Basis of this Union' is the Lordship of Christ, not a sharing of resources, important though this be.

## Putting the Authorities in Order

The first clause of the Declaration of Principle thus sets up a relationship between the local church and the wider Church of Christ. This balance is of course present in that the introductory phrase refers to the idea of a Union of churches ("The Basis of this Union is ..."), while the first clause affirms the 'liberty' of the individual local congregation. But this is not the heart of the matter. The relationship between local and more-than-local Church is created through beginning with the Lordship of Christ, and then moving on to the liberty of the local church to discern that Universal Lordship. We are pointed to the relationship between the various spheres of church life in which Christ makes himself visible as his Body in the world.

The Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 (The London Confession) shows that there was a realisation from early on in our life as Baptists that a balance was required between the privileges of the local church on the one hand, and on the other the necessity to live, work and seek the guidance of God together 'as members of one body':

Although the particular congregations be distinct and several bodies, every one a community and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same

rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of the one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.

The first sentence of the Declaration therefore sets out three kinds of authority: Christ, Scripture and Church Meeting, in that order. This blend, we believe, has something peculiarly Baptist about it. The way that these three elements come together belongs to our story, our identity, though of course others share the story in various ways.

The recent report of the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union, *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council*, suggested that a local church might admit that it needs the help of others to find the mind of Christ on certain issues. It might not have all the resources within itself. Several people wrote back and said they found this degrading to the local church. Why should it be thought, one church secretary wrote in indignation, that other churches have superior Christians, more talented members than our own? Where are we going to find these super-Christians, he demanded, who will help a local church find the mind of Christ? But this misses the point made by the report itself that we need each other, not because others are stronger, but sometimes just because they are weaker. In covenant together we are willing to hear what Christ has to say to us through the weakest members of the Body, those who seem in the eyes of the world the most insignificant (1 Corinthians 12:22). In finding the mind of Christ we need to listen to the marginalised, the overlooked, with whom he identifies himself. This is what it means to begin with Christ as the 'sole and absolute authority'.

A compelling reason for gathering in covenant with other churches is our responsibility to each other, in helping each other to find the purpose of Christ. However strong and large a local church might be, however many members, however many in its ministry team, it needs to listen to others to understand its mission. It needs to hear how Christians in a Latin American shanty town understand their mission, how Christians in a South African township understand justice, how Christians in Eastern Europe understand the meaning of freedom. And in association with other local churches closer home, the word from Christ will often come from the small fellowship that may seem the weakest and the most in need of help. The point of associating is not just for the strong to help the weak: it is to allow the weak to give something to the

strong. There is a responsibility in covenant to enable others to find who they are, and to find the gift they have to offer.

This is what true 'liberty' in the Lord implies. This is solidarity in covenant with each other and with Christ. This is what it means to follow the vision of the Declaration of Principle in always beginning with Christ.

# The Question of Baptism

Clause 2 of the Declaration of Principle reads:

*That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'.*

One of the predictable sections for any Baptist Declaration of Principle is a clause concerning believer's baptism. To some outside the denomination, the most obvious Baptist distinctive appears to be believers' baptism in contrast with infant baptism. This inadequate view is unfortunately endorsed by our given nickname of 'Baptists'. Whereas the believers in Antioch were labelled 'Christians' to great effect, the name Baptists at best limits us too severely to one distinctive and at worst caricatures the profound interacting biblical convictions which provide 'The Basis of this Union'.

It is with some relief therefore that we find in the Declaration of Principle that this statement on baptism occurs as the *second* clause. The ordering of the Declaration places believers' baptism as a secondary issue dependent on the primary convictions about the sole and absolute authority of Christ, the revelation of Scripture, and the liberty of each local church under the Holy Spirit. Our strongest Baptist distinctives lie in our ecclesiology which emerges from our obedience to Christ and our listening to Scripture. It is the radical view of the church, rather than a particular view of baptism that is critical for Baptist principles. Only when we recognise the priority of the Baptist way of being church, can we then make a declaration about the significance of what believers' baptism means about belonging to Christ and joining his church.

## A Fusion of Scripture Passages.

Though we recognise that believers' baptism was a predictable clause in this Declaration, the way in which the sentence has been constructed is far from predictable. Its single statement fuses two key Scripture passages with an additional reference possibly to a third - Matthew 28:18-20, 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Acts 2:38. The way in which vital theological connections are made shows considerable care in the drafting. These words provide us today with a substantial framework, and we must ask whether they are strong enough to

bear the weight of meaning later generations of Baptists might wish to give to the doctrine of baptism, and profound enough to remain acceptable in its summary of biblical witness on baptism.

We recognise that a first reaction might easily read this second clause as a polemical stab at paedo-baptism. The stress on *immersion, repentance and faith*, could be interpreted as a judgement on those not immersed with personal repentance and belief. It is probable that there was some animus in the original drafting that injected an element of hostility to sharpen the divide between believers' baptism and paedo-baptism. Out of our experience of discussing the issues of believers' baptism with fellow Baptists we find that frequently there is this undercurrent of a certain fierceness about infant-baptism. It takes only the merest hint of paedo-baptist sympathy to arouse a crusading spirit which sounds out our biblical understandings of baptism with blasts of self-confidence.

As we consider this Declaration it is important to realise that the defining verb 'is' may be regarded as offering two possibilities. One is that it stands in a narrowly exclusive position leaving no other option. This will appeal to the polemicist and the crusading spirit. Any such emphatic and exclusive claim which draws clear boundaries and places us on higher biblical ground appeals to our need for security and identity. We should also see, however, that as a definition it could provide a strong centre whilst also allowing space on the boundaries for other possibilities. To declare our belief that Christian baptism is immersion in the trinitarian name is an inescapable Baptist distinctive. Moreover, it is the normative form of baptism recognised by the other major Christian denominations. This high degree of consensus provides a strong case for support. For most Baptists, Christian baptism is New Testament baptism, game set and match. But this same strength of conviction requires sensitivity towards others. Those who would define Christian baptism in a wider biblical context, especially in their understandings of the Old Testament circumcision and covenant traditions, need to be heard sympathetically. In the current debate on infant baptism and so-called 'rebaptism' (as in the Baptist Union discussion document: *Believing and Being Baptized*, 1996), we require a declaration that provides Baptists both with strength of principle and a genuine openness to others.

## Rooted in Scripture

The centre of our reflections on this clause, however, must focus on the way that it brings together powerful biblical affirmations with such dramatic

potency. The first part of the clause is rooted in Matthew 28:18-20. Already we have seen how this Scripture provides the basis for the entire Declaration, but it is particularly appropriate for this clause on baptism itself. Indeed, the relevance of Matthew 28:18-19 continues to impress us. Here the emphasis is on 'disciples' baptism'. The Lord, with full authority commands: "Therefore, go and make *disciples ... baptising and teaching.*" The primary command is that Jesus is sending his followers to 'make disciples', bringing others into the relationship of pupil to teacher. He characterises this making of disciples by paralleling two powerful participles - baptising and teaching. When someone responds to Christ both these things should follow - baptism and instruction. This emphasis on the learning process that each believer makes resonates well with the picture of the 'journey' which each Christian experiences in their own story of faith. It is provocative to see how Matthew 28:19 encourages a model of baptism where nurture through teaching is assumed, as compared with the model of baptism where a strong conversion theology is seen as typical (such as in Acts 2:38). In fact the clause does not continue with the 'disciple' theology of Matthew 28 but rather refers to 'repentance and faith' which may allude to the passage in Acts.

For some Baptists almost everything is said about the biblical warrant for believers' baptism by quoting Matthew 28:19. Jesus commanded that disciples be baptised and his *command* does not expire until 'the very end of the age' so we must practice it. Frequently in handbooks on believers' baptism the threefold reasons for its significance are listed as: it is the *command* of Jesus in his Great Commission, it is the *example* of Jesus in his own baptism in the Jordan, and it is the *practice of the early church* as demonstrated on the Day of Pentecost. Paradoxically, in this clear-cut biblical authority for the practice of baptism there lurks a danger. At times Baptists may so concentrate on this warrant for believers' baptism that they fail to move on and explain the biblical connection between Christian baptism and the *Person and work* of Jesus Christ. Practice can be emphasised at the expense of New Testament theology. The greatest strength of this clause is that it refuses to allow this to happen. It combines Matthew 28:19 with a powerful christological statement from 1 Corinthians 15:3 in its second part. By all means we should begin with the Great Commission but it is essential that we move on into deeper places of the salvation of Christ and how this relates to baptism itself.

So let us give attention to how this clause develops Matthew 28:19. First

we must note the strong emphasis on immersion as the mode of baptism. Of course, there is no such qualification in the Great Commission itself so why did the writers choose to insert this particular word?

There are at least two possibilities to stimulate us. One concerns the matter of practice - that a direct contrast had to be made with the other *mode* of baptism as sprinkling. At times in our history much energy has been expended on arguing about the mode with the rigorous rejection of what was thought to be the unbiblical notion of sprinkling.

The rejection has been particularly robust when sprinkling has been identified with the act of infant baptism. All the polemical intensity which I referred to earlier explodes with particular force when 'sprinkling' an infant is substituted for the act of Christian baptism.

However, 'sprinkling' or affusion is also part of believers' baptismal history. It appears that the earliest Anabaptists did not practice immersion though at all times it was believers' baptism. From time to time there have been arguments about the amount of water involved in baptism. It is argued that Jesus' own baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan presupposed total immersion, particularly when allied with the additional evidence about John the Baptist's baptising at Aenon at Salim "... because there was plenty of water" (John 3:23). The word *baptizo* has a root meaning of 'plunge' or 'dip' which further strengthens the call for immersion. Furthermore, the nature of baptism as burial in Romans 6 is seen to imply an immersion beneath the water, just as cleansing and putting on the new humanity infers an immersion process.

As we reflect on this Declaration clause we realise that it may have been primarily a polemical point that was originally made. But we do have another positive opportunity. The other possibility is to open up the theology of this Declaration and emphasise the dynamic theological truth of baptism *into* the Name. The prime idea here is that baptism is a total immersion of new believers with all that they are and have into an entirely new life in relationship within the Name. Water is the powerful biblical symbol to express the reality of the believer's faith relationship with its wholeness swept up in the dynamic movement of believers' baptism.

Normally, in this verse Matthew 28:19, the preposition *eis* is translated 'in' and the word 'name' does not have a capital letter. This clause deliberately

translates this word with the much more emphatic word 'into' and capitalises 'Name'. At a stroke these two changes express how much Christian baptism is a personal movement with dynamic incorporation into fresh commitment. The very word *into* strongly suggests a 'coming-into-relationship with'. Something powerful is happening both to the individual concerned, but also to the whole community which itself belongs to the Name. This extraordinary move from being outside of a living relationship to living within the community of faith needs an emphatic immersion in water to begin to do it justice.

With the capitalising of the Name of the Trinity, there is also a conscious heightening of the reality of the presence of God for the believer. In the Bible, the power of the 'name' of God means that the name is to be revered (as in 'hallowed be your name'). To be baptised into the name speaks of an awesome relationship of the believer with the very being of the triune God. We must mark with wonder how this quotation from Matthew 28:19 continues its command about baptising with the full trinitarian formula of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We recognise that this full description of God has been questioned not only regarding its biblical authenticity, but also concerning its appropriateness for believers' baptism. Within the rest of the New Testament all the evidence we have of actual Christian baptisms consistently uses the name of Jesus only. See Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5. Yet the thrill of this Declaration is precisely in its ringing affirmation of the fullness of the nature of God as revealed in three Persons within the event of baptism. It is baptism into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It enables us to see the act of believers' baptism in its profound dimensions as incorporation into rich fellowship with God. Here there is a participation in life in God, a sharing in divine life where water in baptism, and baptism in the Spirit clearly interweave.

We should also note that in Scripture the power of the 'Name' of God provides evidence of ownership. When 1 Corinthians 1:13, 15 speaks of being 'baptised into the name of', there is an assumption that this person is now the property of, or under the protection of, the bearer of that name. This clause, by capitalising the Name, emphasises both the glorious possibility of the believer participating in the trinitarian relationship, and also the right of God to own the believer. In older Baptist service books, such as that compiled by Payne and Winward, candidates were baptised with these next words: "...on your



profession of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The two key characteristics of those who are baptised are repentance and faith. These are inseparable as they speak of the interaction of God’s grace and human response at the heart of the miracle of Christian experience.

As mentioned earlier, it may be that the call of the apostle Peter in Acts 2:38 with its strong conversion theology lies behind the inclusion of these words.

Jesus made ‘Repent and believe’ his kingdom clarion call (Mark 1:15), so linking inextricably together these two sides of commitment. Repentance should never be seen merely as a negative act which is full of remorse for the past. Only by the stirring of God’s gracious gift in Jesus Christ, which evokes the first steps of faith, can anyone see clearly their need to turn towards God in the first place. Genuine grief for sin is the accompaniment of genuine faith in Jesus Christ. The overwhelming reality of the triune God, from whose glory we fall so short, encounters us so that we both recoil with self-awareness of loathsome sin and yet also reach out to receive the undeserved wonder of God’s forgiveness. Believers’ baptism testifies to this supreme experience of salvation.

If there is sometimes a failure to hold these two aspects together, there is also often insufficient justice done to each. Repentance marks a decisive turnaround of direction for the whole person. Here is the totality of new birth and new life which immersion in the Name and by the power of the new owner demonstrates. The call to new lifestyle, the resolute rejection of the old self and former ways is explicit in the act of baptism. Renunciation has to be clear. What the New Testament speaks of as saying ‘No’ to previous life-styles as in Colossians 3 is an ethical response of baptism.

Early Baptist Confessions of Faith stressed the importance of baptism and teaching. We have already noted that significance of Matthew 28:19 as it combines: “Go, *make* disciples of all nations, *baptising* them, and *teaching* them.” Earlier generations took this more seriously than we often do. Before and after the act of baptism it was assumed that there was a catechising of candidates to ensure that the implications of repentance and faith were properly understood. The London Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 states that faith is ordinarily begotten by the preaching of the gospel and that baptism is “... an ordinance for persons professing faith or that are Disciples or taught.” This instructional element seems to be under threat in some contemporary churches with minimal ‘baptismal preparation’. The desire to acknowledge faith commitment can be allowed to override the prior disciplines of teaching particularly concerning repentance.

## Baptismal Life in Christ

At the beginning we noted the powerful way in which this clause combines Matthew 28:19 with 1 Corinthians 15:3. Too often Baptists have seemed to quote the former as their authority for believers' baptism as though once you have cited the command of Jesus there is nothing more to say. The Declaration moves on to the essential matter of how baptism relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It concerns New Testament theology as well as New Testament practice. The faith of the believer is defined as: "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'." As we saw from the implications of the Name of the Trinity, believers' baptism points to participation in the being of God. This quotation from 1 Corinthians 15:3 emphasises that the christological heart of baptism is not related to any one single moment of Christ's life. Rather baptism relates to the whole redemptive action of God in Christ involving the cross with his dying for our sins, the burial, and the resurrection.

This clause uses 1 Corinthians 15:3 to define the nature of saving faith in Christ. Rather than allowing the focus of believers' baptism to be limited by reference to the baptismal candidates' own repentance and faith, it widens the scope to embrace the whole work of our Lord Jesus Christ. But in this verse it also defines the very nature of baptism itself. Baptism is immersion into the Name, and into our Lord Jesus Christ who was born, died, was buried, and rose again the third day. Here is the whole expanse of the incarnation, atonement and resurrection life of Christ. It is through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we receive the gift of new life. Romans 6:1-4 goes on to claim that we are united with him in his death and resurrection through faith and baptism. This participation of the believer in the saving work of Christ promises to make baptism an event of profound significance. In the baptismal event we believe that God may meet the believer in the fullness of his work as faith responds to grace.

There continues to be a major division among Baptists between those who assert that baptism is a *sign* only, and others who would argue for it being a *symbol*. Sometimes we have made little distinction between these two by almost approximating them to each other in contrast to the word *sacrament*. Occasionally you hear mention of 'mere symbol'. It is vital to reaffirm the significance of the word symbol which should be understood to have deeper properties of representation. Baptism as a sign is understood to use immersion

in water as witness to interior truth. Baptism as symbol understands that more is happening in the baptismal event with a participation in a spiritual reality to which baptism testifies.

Much traditional Baptist theology has seen baptism as primarily a confessing or declaratory ordinance. The Particular Baptists saw baptism as a sign of death, resurrection and new birth for the believer. John Bunyan famously expressed his view: "I find not that baptism is a sign to any but the person baptised." This view, when taken to extremes, has led to a casual relationship between baptism and church membership and run the danger of so emphasising the subjective meaning of baptism that it actually becomes a mere external rite.

It should follow from an understanding of the deepened theological content of baptism and the belief that baptism is prayer for the Holy Spirit that baptism is more than a sign. We should anticipate that the Holy Spirit may both give and be given in baptism. In Scripture, everything that is attributed to faith can be attributed to baptism also: union with Christ, participation in his death and resurrection, becoming a child of God, giving of the Spirit, inheritance of the kingdom and salvation. Alongside "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8a) can be set "And this water (ie the flood) symbolises baptism that now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God." (1 Peter 3:21).

The most recent restatement of British Baptist beliefs in the report *Believing and Being Baptized* (1996) embraces the view of baptism being symbol "... with the fullest meaning of something in the world which enables us to participate in the spiritual reality to which it points." It goes on to say:

As a person comes in faith to the baptismal pool, the triune God meets him or her with a gracious presence which transforms his or her life. Of course, a relationship between the believers and God has already begun before the moment of baptism, but this is now deepened in a special moment of encounter.

The report describes this interaction between grace and faith in baptism by picturing our relationship with God as a 'journey'. This journey will vary

dramatically from individual to individual depending on all kinds of circumstances such as whether or not they have been nurtured in a Christian home. What is common to the development of all Christians are the three tenses of salvation. Christians *have been* saved, we are *being* saved (through continual growth in our relationship with God) and we *shall be* saved at the final appearing of Christ. Baptism is then regarded as a decisive moment in the process of being saved, whenever the process of salvation actually began (See 1 Peter 3:21).

## A Dynamic Basis for Baptists

What, then, is the contemporary relevance of this second clause? Does it remain both strong enough to bear the weight of meaning which later generations of Baptists might wish to give to the doctrine of baptism, and also profound enough to remain acceptable in its summary of biblical witness?

We remain convinced that the fusion of Matthew 28:18-20, which shapes the whole Declaration of Principle, with 1 Corinthians 15:3 helpfully expresses our convictions about baptism for today. Here is no lightweight appeal to New Testament practice only, but heavyweight treatment of believers' baptism as the promise of participation in the being of God himself. The extra emphases in this quotation of Matthew 28:19, by translating 'into' and by capitalising 'Name', add weight to the vital relationship the believer has with our triune God. It may be that more work needs to be done on the further issue of 'disciples' baptism' as Matthew 28:19 appears to speak of the learning process within the Christian's spiritual 'journey'. This is not pursued by this clause which, perhaps, too quickly alludes to the repentance and faith of Acts 2:38.

The quotation from 1 Corinthians 15:3, however, goes straight to the christological core of believers' baptism. It speaks of the baptismal event as symbolising the believer's participation in the salvation story with powerful echoes from Romans 6:1-13, Galatians 3:26-28, Colossians 2:11, 12. By combining part of the Great Commission with the life and work of Jesus, this clause provides a dynamic basis for Baptists as we go on working and thinking through our baptismal life and witness together.



# The Question of Mission

Clause 3 of the Declaration of Principle reads:

*That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.*

This clause is concerned with what today we more commonly call mission. As with the earlier two clauses, the only way to hear the full potential of its challenge is examine it within the wider context of its place within the whole Declaration of Principle. If this is not done, then it will almost certainly be dismissed as a dated and grossly inadequate description of mission. It may be accused of being too narrowly focused in evangelism as ‘proclamation’, an essential aspect of mission but far from its whole story. It may be seen as a sell-out to an over-individualistic vision for ‘personal discipleship’ now typically associated with the very worst of our nineteenth century inheritance. As with other parts of the Declaration, it would be foolish to deny that the precise phrases of this third clause do indeed belong to an earlier time and were chosen to express attitudes and motives important at a particular moment in the Baptist story. Our argument here, however, is that, if these words are heard in a wider context and if we fully exploit such open possibilities for exposition as are genuinely latent within them, there remains a very strong case for allowing this particular historical form of the Declaration still to voice what we need to name as our core response to the Gospel.

Certainly we need to read this clause within the consistent christological framework of the whole Declaration. We have already seen how Christ is rightly given first place in every matter of authority, and we have seen this worked out in an exposition of baptism, seeking to do real justice to the full potential of its rich symbolism. The missionary nature of discipleship must be read within the same framework too. Because disciples are immersed through baptism into the trinitarian dynamic of the life of God, the Christlike God made known to us through the sending of his Son, the implications are clear for every baptised believer. Discipleship and the Christlike self-offering of love are one and the same.

Matthew 28:16-20, already named as providing essential background to the

first two clauses of the Declaration, again comes to the surface as the chief Scripture-foundation of this clause. It has long been used as a missionary text - disciples are those who are 'sent' at the command of Jesus - but here in the full context of the Declaration all its themes are pulled together. 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.

## Mission and Duty

One of the words which might today stand a little uncomfortably is 'duty', not a word we use too much these days. This is significant for Baptists in a mission context, however, because it reminds us of a notion widely used in the new evangelical Calvinism of Fuller and Carey which, in the late eighteenth century, became the inspiration for our own Baptist Missionary Society. "I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the Gospel to all who will hear it ... I consider it as part of my duty which I could not omit without being guilty of the blood of souls" wrote Andrew Fuller; and what is true of every minister is true of every disciple-believer and every gathered Christian community for whom this Declaration is important.

In the light of the full Declaration, however, 'duty' by no means expresses all that needs to be said. Alone, duty suggests too strongly unaided choosing by the would-be disciple; it stresses our response in 'promise' at the loss of God's initiative in 'calling'. If, as our exposition of baptism has suggested, there is a real sense in which we are incorporated into the life of God, there is also the impact of God's grace on our living. Our discipleship ceases to be just a response of duty and becomes a participation in the energy and life of the missionary God.

## The Mission of God

All of this encourages us to read the third clause in a more contemporary theological context; namely, what Christian movements world-wide have referred to as the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Since the middle of this century a great variety of theologians, Protestant and Catholic alike, have explored the strategy of allowing the 'mission of God' to act as a canon, a kind of measure, against which to test the validity of our personal and corporate discipleship. In particular this has been mediated to Baptists and others

through the writings of David Bosch, most famous for his monumental work *Transforming Mission*.

The idea of the 'mission of God' is one which is pregnant with all the energy of a creative ambiguity at the very heart of the Gospel. Is it, for example, the 'mission of God' in the sense of that mission which God calls us to go and effect, God's in as much as this is what God intends? Or is it perhaps the 'mission of God' in the sense of that mission in which God is the chief player, God's in as much as God is actively at work in it? Or is it both - and more besides? The genius of the 'mission of God' concept is that it embraces so much that is crucial to a full statement of the Gospel. Its central ambiguity is exactly the same ambiguity which we have already met in the discussion of baptism: the believer both chooses baptism as a symbol of the intention to follow Jesus, and also is chosen by God in baptismal immersion to share by the Spirit in God's life and work in the world.

In this way, therefore, we begin to see the way in which the Declaration of Principle, by moving on from baptism into its affirmation of the trinitarian life of God, was already making its own version of the *missio Dei* work as a lens, or prism, through which the personal and corporate discipleship of the Baptist community can be passed as a test of its authenticity and credibility in the Gospel. What is made explicit in its third clause is seen to be implicit in the whole; and indeed is only fully understood in that wider context.

## A Paradigm Shift

The claim of many contemporary missiologists, those with a specialist commitment to the study of mission, is that our generation is party to a 'paradigm shift'. This is a term originally culled from the world of science, and indicates the emergence of a whole new way of thinking; so the missiologists are suggesting that there has been a major change in our thinking about mission, and that this is at the very core of God's prophetic word to the church in our time.

Paradigm shifts are, of course, always unnerving. They can feel like a radical and dangerous under-mining of hard-won traditions; they easily look like a betrayal of the Gospel. Paradoxically, however, often they have been motivated by a fresh return to the 'roots', the true radicalism, and have opened up new futures, in time recognised as the most significant works of the Spirit



in a particular age.

At which point, Baptists should take heart; for we have lived through paradigm shifts in our understanding of mission before. We have already named the momentous shift which paved the way for the formation of our own Baptist Missionary Society, a shift which in retrospect we now applaud as courageous and prophetic. Out of it grew a new sense of responsibility for ‘the evangelization of the world’, as a duty and not merely as an option. That new paradigm of mission stood for more than a century, and can be credited with an unprecedented contribution to the spread of the Gospel.

So what about another paradigm shift within our own time? This is a complex story, and not one which can easily be told in the span of a short paragraph. It is part of a movement which reaches far beyond the confines of the church, a shift in understanding with repercussions right across the world. Many of its symptoms follow from the accelerating growth of those technologies which have enabled global communication and seemingly reduced the size of the planet to little more than a village. Religions now meet other religions in unprecedented proximity, and old strategies for the management of power and control in our world are no longer adequate. Most people now live in contexts marked by immensely increased diversity, often fragmentation, and the Christian church has not been able to remain aloof from this process of change. All of which has heralded a fresh paradigm for mission. Commentators offer us many possible characteristics; here I can only pick out a few.

Firstly, the new paradigm of mission is *interactive*; it is about partnership, and no longer conceived as just a one way transaction. Nineteenth century missionary imperialism is not acceptable, globally or locally, any more. In mission we are all ‘receivers’ as well as ‘senders’. This is already well modelled for Baptists by the changed strategies of our own Missionary Society, which has now long emphasised partnership in every part of its life. 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.

Secondly, mission under the new paradigm is *diverse* in expression. The most obvious reason for this would be the diversity of its agents; but the really

significant reason is far more subtle. It is not the diversity of agents but the diversity of contexts which really count. The new paradigm demands that the diversity of contexts into which mission 'sends' becomes the controlling factor in shaping the forms which mission takes. Contexts are important for what they are and not merely for how they might be changed. Our Colleges have been learning that the best theological education is always 'contextual'; that is, it takes its shape from the contexts in which it takes place. What is evidently 'good news' for one part of the world, or group within society, may not automatically be such 'good news' for another. Once again interaction is crucial; 'speakers' must first be 'listeners', and 'teachers' must first be 'learners'.

The recognised diversity of mission is most surely evident in the breakdown of many old battle-lines; for example, those between so-called evangelical- and social-gospel. Certainly for Britain's new evangelicals' proclamation and practical care are increasingly seen to belong hand in hand, and take their shape differently according to time and context - which is precisely what 'evangelization' means in this clause. Again this is only what the 'mission of God' perspective encourages us to expect; for in God's mission as we have seen it in the ministry of Jesus, we know that we are treated as we are, in our actual need, and not just as we might have been if all shared an identical predicament.

Thirdly - though this may do little more than make explicit what is already implicit in the first two points - mission according to the new paradigm is a *corporate* and not just an individual affair. The deep well-being of 'senders' and 'receivers' are both at stake in every missionary endeavour. The First World rich have their own need of healing, as well as the Third World poor who become the focus for aid. There are ways in which the only the powerless can set free the powerful, as well as the powerful the powerless. On the 'mission of God' model, God's sending of Jesus in weakness and vulnerability has fixed the measure once and for all.

So what we are finding, time and again, is that the 'mission of God' must be determinative for the mission of the church; and if we are doubtful about the credibility of our mission, we must return and measure it again against the God in whose life it originates and belongs.

An unnerving consequence, of course, is that we can no longer rely on 'success' as a reliable indicator of appropriate mission. Bosch argued that we have been hopelessly betrayed by this in the past. In the 'mission of God' the

greatest missionary achievement was the handing-over of the Son. There is, of course, more than one theme in the gospel story. The Gospel has a proper triumph to which we rightly testify in the resurrection of the crucified one; but mission has too often sought to achieve its triumph by routes other than that of the cross. The 'mission of God' was wonderfully manifest through the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, already used as an illustration in the discussion of authority. Its 'success' was hardly evident at the time; that is, if numbers giving their support are taken as the measure. The truth of the matter is that, when the church is true to the 'mission of God', it cannot guarantee to be popular either inside or outside the church of its day. Baptists should know this; we came into being not for the cause of popularity or 'success', but for justice and freedom of the Gospel.

## Baptists and Future Mission

So what of the third clause of the Declaration of Principle? It seems to us that interpreted in the full context of the whole Declaration, it gives ample scope for today's Baptists again to take their place as participants in the 'mission of God' for our time. The invitation is to 'take part in' a corporate venture, deeply 'personal' in style, rooted in Gospel of Jesus Christ, and profoundly 'good news' for the world. All of which feels timely in this 'Decade of Evangelism' - or is it 'Evangelisation', as the Roman Catholics would tell us? Even that little controversy reveals its own important questions about the shape that initiatives in the mission of God should take. The 'Evangelism' initiative, it seems, is largely directed to the 'unchurched' population of late twentieth century Britain, whereas 'Evangelisation' is seen as a process primarily focused within the life of the Church. The former is primarily proclamatory, the latter educational. Our consideration of baptism has already highlighted how important education (or catechesis) is in Baptist life. Maybe we need to listen carefully to the emphases of *both* these Decades and bring them together in creative synthesis. Certainly Baptists urgently need to consider how their own contribution to the remainder of the Decade and beyond fits within this framework.

So, we claim, there is every reason for today's Baptist to allow our own fresh search for identity, and especially our search for God's calling in mission, to be bound up with this third clause of the Declaration of Principle and shaped by it, as if by a lens. It is still capable of bringing into focus both what is rich in the tradition we inherit and prophetic for the future to which we, with God, aspire.

### **Section III**

## **CONCLUSION**

# A Living Baptist Identity

What, then, are we saying to today's Baptists with this study of the Declaration of Principal? Several things come to mind.

Firstly, we want to emphasise our deep commitment to all that we perceive to be rich and strong for the Gospel in our Baptist heritage, and we are enthusiastic that our distinctive contribution to the World Church is not lost. We dare to believe that it is a gift from God for all Christian people, and we are keen to share it. We do not agree with those who simply tell us that we are in a post-denominational age, and we believe that we need to face with realism the challenging task of shaping a credible and effective Baptist identity for our time.

We do want to make it clear, however, that our enthusiasm for an exploration of Baptist identity is not intended in any way to be anti-ecumenical. In our different ways we are all deeply committed to a variety of ecumenical processes. We will be misunderstood if this booklet is taken to be an exercise in mere denominationalism; we are not interested simply in beating the Baptist drum!

Our interest, however, is strictly focused in a 'living' Baptist identity, and not merely with the preservation of relics from the past. As we have worked at this study we have been pleasantly surprised by the measure to which it remains fitting to describe our Declaration of Principle as a 'living text'. At first, some of us suspected that we might find it too archaic for direct use in the modern world. As we have stayed with it, however, it has become clear to us all that it still has much to offer. Some of the very features which made us sceptical - its open-endedness, for example - have finally become the central reasons for wanting to affirm it as a 'covenant document' more than adequate as 'The Basis for this Union' in 1996.

Sometimes our exposition might be thought to stretch a point. Fair enough! This is what a 'living text' is all about. We have tried to give careful attention to historical contexts, but we are also creative theologians and we need not apologise when we enable ancient words to release fresh energy in another age. What attracts us to this brief, but profound Declaration, is precisely its ability to speak timely wisdom across the specificity of distant historical contexts.

In particular two things strike us with significant force. Firstly, there is the historical insight that this Declaration was forged with the intent of holding in

Union Baptists with widely differing theological understandings. This is a motive we admire and would seek to emulate amongst our contemporaries. This is the genius of its slender framework, an open-endedness which refuses to exclude what can properly be held in partnership. We believe that the Baptist Union of 1996 will be greatly impoverished if it is unable to maintain the same open-hearted spirit so characteristic of those who first shaped this Declaration on our behalf.

Secondly, however, we are struck by the depth of content which this slender framework so ably supports. Much of this relies on its creative use of The Great Commission in Matthew 28, which provides the overall movement from authority, through baptism, into mission. Likewise the detailed exposition of authority, with its own movement from Christ, through Scripture, into the community of the Local Church, captures the very crux of our Baptist identity, and provides a crucial safeguard for our grass-roots faith communities - in a time when all manner of authorities are competing in the market place. Ultimately we take pride in this Declaration because of its deeply christological centre. It 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. We take pride in this Declaration because it is a profoundly theological statement; and not just another pragmatic expedient generated from within the entrepreneurial market place.

Our hope is that reading this booklet will help those who are about to engage in our Denominational Consultation to take fresh pride in these, our denominational roots. We hope it will help today's Baptists to find in the words of the Declaration a continuing basis on which to build a living Baptist identity for the 21st century.

We do also have one further suggestion. In the course of this study we were repeatedly struck by the clear distinction which was made between the Declaration - as 'The Basis of this Union' - and the so-called 'Objects of the Union', which stand as Clause 4 of its Constitution. Unlike the Declaration, it seems to us that the Objects are far from timeless and that, indeed, they have become seriously out-dated since last they were significantly overhauled in the revision of 1938. At a time when others on the political scene have been revising 'Clause 4' of their party Constitution, one of the outcomes of the

Consultation might be for us to revisit our own Clause 4, 'The Objects of the Union', and to attempt a restatement of our missionary intent for the turn of the millennium.

It is our conviction that the Declaration of Principle will continue to stand us in good stead as 'The Basis of this Union' for the foreseeable future, and give us precisely the secure framework we need on which to build a vision for the future, inspired and energised by the missionary God.

Our prayer for our sisters and brothers in this denomination is that together we will find the same generous spirit amongst us which prompted our great grand-parents in the faith in 1904 to focus on the words of The Great Commission, and supremely on the centrality of Christ, and to make these the firm basis of their common life. Our hope is that, if we can again adequately tap into the true vitality of their vision, we also will indeed have something to declare!

# Notes

In this booklet reference has been made to a number of books and documents, and the following details may be useful for those intending further study.

It will certainly be helpful to read this booklet alongside any of the recent publications produced by the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union. In the text, special reference is made to:

*The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Baptist Union Publications, 1994)

*Believing and Being Baptized: Baptism, so-called re-baptism and children in the church* (Baptist Union Publications, 1996).

Reference to Baptist 'Confessions of Faith' can be followed up in W L Lumpkin (Editor), *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Judson Press, Philadelphia, 1959); and the full text of the Barmen Declaration can be found in Arthur C Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962).

Reference is also made to David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991) and to Barrie R White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (OUP, London, 1971).

## Acknowledgement

The authors wish to express their particular gratitude to Douglas Sparkes, formerly Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union, whose unpublished research provided much of the historical information used as background for this study.