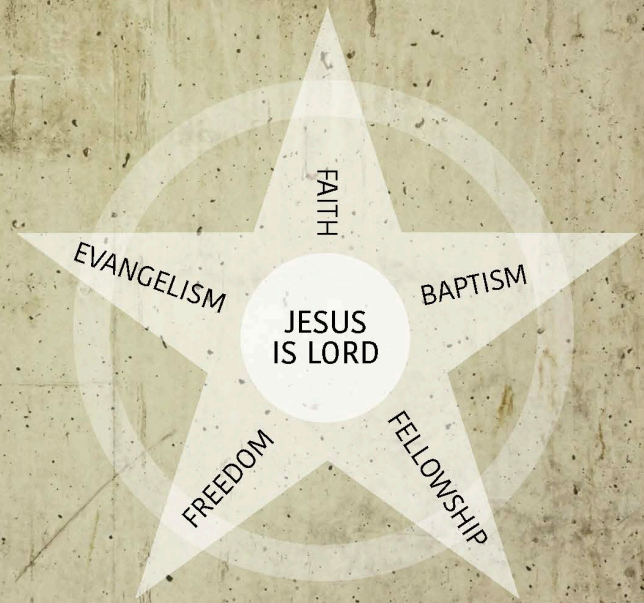


ISSN 2634-0275

Journal of Baptist Theology *in context*



Issue 5 (2022)

Theology and Ministerial Formation in the Bristol and Baptist Traditions¹

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Key Words: Baptist, evangelical, Bristol Tradition

It is sometimes claimed by people who have been faced with the prospect of imminent death that ‘my whole life flashed before my eyes’. I had something of a similar experience when reading Anthony R. Cross’s fine book on ministerial formation entitled, *To communicate clearly you must understand profoundly*.² To be sure, to refer to ‘imminent death’ is entirely inappropriate in that the book is in no way life-threatening, nor at 664 pages in length could anything be described as ‘imminent’. But in offering a review of Baptist theological education from its very beginnings the book also offered me personally a review of my own life and of the things that have been important to me ever since as a Mancunian teenager my life underwent a reorientation in a Godward direction, in other words a Christian conversion. Even before that I had developed a shadowy awareness of Baptist theological education when, accompanying my father in the early 1960s on one of our occasional Sunday morning walks through the highways and byways of south Manchester we happened upon a building project that he explained to me was the reconstruction of a place where Baptist ministers are trained — the Northern Baptist College. This was interesting but not particularly significant to me at that point, but as is the way with these early chance experiences, its significance came to grow on me and to become as much a part of me as did the urban walking to which I have been addicted ever since.

¹ This article was first given as a lecture at the Community Day for Bristol Baptist College on Wednesday 23rd March 2022 at Westbury-on-Trym Baptist Church.

² Anthony R. Cross, “*To communicate simply you must understand profoundly*”: *Preparation for Ministry Among British Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2016).

For sure, when I talk about a life review, the earliest parts of Anthony's book lie well beyond reach of my memory. But as the story progressed, I encountered names and places that reached back into the dawn of my Baptist consciousness, names that I knew by reputation, or sometimes people I had encountered tangentially, or then more substantially, or even formatively as some became my teachers. And then slowly I became part of the story, a player in the drama, even an actor bringing some kind of influence, for good or ill, on the lives of others and the course of events. It's an interesting experience to realise that you have passed into history and that things that you said, did or wrote have served to shape the present — and you must take responsibility for them. All in all after reading Anthony's book, and re-reading some of the parallel literature, I am left with a great sense of respect for those who have gone before, those whom I have known along the way, and those who labour in this particular vineyard today.

My own life accompanies a narrative concerning theological and ministerial education that for most of us will be reasonably familiar and aspects of which will be detected in today's conference. When in 1970 having graduated from Leeds University I entered Spurgeon's College to prepare for ministry, the landscape seems, in retrospect, to have been quite uni-dimensional. The mixed bunch embarking on training were almost exclusively male, single and in their early twenties and were embarking upon a course that would last between three and five years and would be predominantly academic. The assumption at the time tended towards the belief, as it did in other spheres such as teaching, that academic achievement was the primary preparation needed for ministry. More practical or denominational subjects took place outside the degree or diploma curriculum and were accompanied by regular availability for preaching, by assistantships in local churches, summer pastorates or, in later parts of the course, student pastorates.

To me, young, inexperienced and lacking Baptist pedigree as I was, all of this was invaluable. To be fair, there was not the

assumption that these initial steps would do anything other than lay the foundations for future learning, or, as Dr George Beasley-Murray put it early on, to 'adumbrate' all that was to follow, a word of which at the time I was unaware. The dictionary told me it means 'to foreshadow vaguely'. College years were followed by probationary studies and a relatively informal link to a 'senior friend,' a link that in my case involved one telephone conversation, although probably more in terms of distant observation. I enjoyed those years and undoubtedly gained from them but have never been nostalgic for them. College was residential, semi-monastic, slightly public-school or Oxbridge-college like, closed to women and older candidates or difficult for them to access. There were things I found distasteful: a degree of competitiveness, an element of testosterone, juvenile raids on other colleges, aggressive football matches, dubious confrontations in sermon class. At the same time there could be fun, genuine fellowship, and friendships, many of which have endured.

However, change was bound to come. The age of entry began to rise from the early twenties to the mid-thirties as more second-career candidates were accepted for training. Financial considerations changed as local authority grants for private colleges became more scarce and loans were introduced. The academic model yielded to a vocational model as the value and quality of practical training was upgraded. Pastoral studies became part of the curriculum as colleges gained more freedom to fashion their own courses and offer them for university accreditation in some form or other. Increasing numbers of women were accepted for training and largely male faculties slowly became more diverse in gender and ethnicity. Of central importance was the accommodation of church-based training with colleges becoming partners of congregations in the formation of ministers, time being equally divided between college and pastorate. This latter development was introduced by the Northern College but gradually the other colleges followed suit to the point where it has become the dominant model for

training.³ Its advantages are considerable in terms of the learning process, reversion to an older Baptist model of learning through apprenticeship, service to churches that may not otherwise have the benefit of consistent ministry – demonstrated increasingly by the frequency with which Ministers in Training stayed on in their pastorates and indeed in more recent modifications to the settlement process. And then there is the shift to more missional ways of thinking, the need to give attention to church-planting or pioneer ministries; and what started out as a specialism for which some in particular were prepared, the realisation has dawned that mission should define all aspects of ministry so that we now speak routinely of ‘mission and ministry’ as our standard perception of what we are about.

What strikes me as I review these shifts of emphasis is the degree to which they track changes that have taken place across the denominations, or at least the Protestant ones, and their similarity to parallel shifts in preparation for other professions such as teaching, nursing and medicine.

Academic knowledge is essential, but effective practice must go hand in hand with it. Increasingly also we might identify developing denominational expectations and emphases.

Witness in this regard the changes in vocabulary from ‘education’ to ‘training’ to ‘formation’; the character of our ministers is as important as their learning.⁴ Their ability to relate to others and to sustain those relationships over time and sometimes to retrieve them from alienation is massively needed. As one regional minister is reputed to have pointed out: ‘Not many ministries fail because a minister’s knowledge of Greek or Hebrew is not up to scratch but rather because they fail in their relationships with people’. Who we are goes together with what we know and what we can do: head, hand and heart.

³ For some of the history see Anthony Clarke, ‘How did we end up here? Theological Education as Ministerial Formation in the British Baptist Colleges’, *Baptist Quarterly* 46.2 (2015): 69-97.

⁴ See Anthony Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2021).

It is entirely right for denominational authorities to specify the qualities of ministers who are called to serve in its ranks. So we have been steered in the direction of ministerial competences and towards expectations that training, increasingly known as formation, will include components relating to ethnic diversity and racial justice, to domestic violence, to ecumenical awareness and acquaintance with non-Christian religions. And given that such expectations have increased to require more time for an expanded curriculum, relatively informal patterns of probationary studies have long since been successfully rethought and reapplied on the pathway to full accreditation. Most recently, although arguably belatedly, careful thought and planning has encompassed plans for life-long ministerial development, as it surely must. A culture of life-long learning allied to continuing development is surely to be applauded.

The narrative I have sought to portray is one of gradual and thoughtful evolution. It is hard to say that any of it has been unnecessary and unhelpful. Hopefully it leaves us in a position where those preparing for ministry in our churches are in a better place than ever before, more than ever suited to the task that awaits them. And here we might make firm connections with the ‘Bristol Tradition’, so-called, that we are recognising and I trust reaffirming today. For this is a tradition that places at its centre and seeks its identity in the provision of ‘able, evangelical’ ministers or to expand this concept, the notion of a ‘learned, godly, able and zealous’ ministry.⁵ To take that word ‘able’ seriously is indeed to pay attention to the abilities to be encouraged in those who serve and, negatively stated, to do all we can to ensure that those who are ordained and accredited in ministry do no harm to the lives and churches with which they are entrusted, but rather, and to state it positively, do good and so glorify God and serve the coming of God’s kingdom. Competence in a

⁵ On the ‘Bristol Tradition’, see now Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *The Story of Bristol Baptist College* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022); cf. W. Morris West, *The Bristol Tradition: Then and Now* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1987).

physician of souls is as important as in a physician of the body. And as Paul Goodliff has expounded at length in perhaps the most comprehensive statement about preparation for Baptist ministry,⁶ ministers are above all to be virtuous. To be sure anyone who believes they are ‘sufficient for these things’ and relies on their own ability has hardly begun to understand the nature of ministry. We do not bear fruit by believing that we can do things but by learning that without Christ nothing we do is of worth: ‘Without me you can do nothing’, said Jesus. There is a real sense in which we are also called to be ‘incompetent’ when this means recognising our limits, and so being constrained to depend upon God’s Spirit.⁷ This is no reason to bring less than the best we can to the work of Christ and his church. It is no light thing if by our incompetence we damage the lives of others and cause them to stumble. But such skills as we have need to be ignited by God’s Spirit if they are to work the work of God.

A question that begs itself in my own mind is, given all the effort to improve the quality of ministerial formation, where is the evidence that the quality of ministry practised has itself improved and is further improving? More precisely, by what criteria could we possibly evaluate that this is the case? Are our congregations closer to God, more deeply informed in faith, more alive in the Spirit, more effective in gathering in the lost, in promoting justice and abounding in love? Or not? Since ministry is not an end in itself but directed towards the building up of the churches, how would we characterise what it means to be a healthy, thriving, wise, resilient Baptist church today that genuinely makes a difference for Christ’s sake in a broken world? And could we achieve a denominational consensus on this towards which our

⁶ Paul W. Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2017).

⁷ Ruth Gouldbourne, ‘In Praise of Incompetence: Ministerial Formation and the Development of a Rooted Person’, in *Truth that Never Dies: The Dr G. R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lectures 2002-2012* edited by Nigel G. Wright (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

individual and corporate efforts could be applied? Our question is not only what does good ministry look like but what should a good Baptist church look like? This would be a piece of work worth attempting, but not today and not on this occasion.

For here my attention must take a turn which I think comes close to our central concern today. There is a question we must inevitably ask. Given the changes that have taken place to our patterns of initial ministerial formation, and given the extra expectations that our developing understandings have inserted into the required curriculum, and given the constraints of time that congregation-based patterns of training force upon us, what has to receive less attention than we have a right to expect? In other words we come full circle and ask whether we now allot insufficient time to specifically biblical and theological studies and are producing ministers whose theological abilities are superficial and thin rather than robust and profound. To arrive at such a state would stand in direct contradiction to the Bristol Tradition in which ministers are to be both able *and* evangelical, that is deeply rooted in an understanding of the gospel and zealous in communicating its riches to believers and non-believers alike.

How do we pay attention to the formation of ministers who are *biblically and theologically educated and learned*, or is this an ideal at which we no longer aim? Are we in danger of becoming a movement that is less than theological served by technicians but not technologists? Now indeed, given that the whole purpose of our calling is to 'know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3), we can never know enough and must always confess ourselves to be beginners. And the question is more than a trivial one since it is from the witness of scripture to Christ that the dynamic that powers every other aspect of ministry must arise; and it is in the formulations of our theology that the significance and logic of biblical revelation are made accessible and persuasive. Without these, every element of our practice is denuded and disempowered. As Colin Gunton has put it, "The promise of theology is that its exponents may

be enabled to cast light on God's creating and saving love'.⁸ There can be few better models for ministry than that provided by the Risen Lord himself when 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' with the disciples later recalling, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us' (Luke 24.27, 32). What an aspiration for the preacher! Acknowledging the genuine promise of theology, we should also confess that there are obstacles in our way over and beyond the problems of getting a quart into a pint pot.

A first obstacle that has been present in the Baptist mind from the beginning and is persistently present today is suspicion of the kind of scholarship that undermines faith and sometimes destroys it. We may be tempted to dismiss such a concern as an expression of anti-intellectualism but should acknowledge that this is a live danger and that studying theology is, and ought to be, dangerous. There is such a thing as the paralysis of analysis. We may all be acquainted with the advice sometimes given to young people not to study theology because it might upset their faith. We might also know of once lively Christians who immersed themselves in theological study only for their Christian discipleship to get lost in the myriad of questions and uncertainties that confronted them and led them to agnostic or even atheistic positions. We could name names in the present world of scholarship, though perhaps fewer than some might imagine. The fact that some Baptists might shift their church allegiances as a result of their encounter with other perspectives may be regrettable but is not, to my mind, particularly disturbing if we accept that there are different ways of being church. But we should also affirm that there is no inevitable link between theological study and loss of spiritual vitality and convinced faith, indeed, the opposite should be the case.

⁸ Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 53.

The purpose of study is precisely to question assumptions and prejudices, to distinguish between what has been unthinkingly assumed or uncritically handed down and what might firmly be grounded in the truth of God. Indeed, it is arguable that all education involves the same kind of process and ought to be at times uncomfortable. We cannot always determine how individuals might navigate this process, although given that all truth is God's truth and is well able to defend itself, we might be confident that it is possible to do so and remain firmly Christian, evangelical, and even Baptist. I dare to say that the Christian faith is questionable at every and any point and that a theological education enables this to be recognised, to cease to fear it and even to find deeper faith through it. There is a pathway that leads from absolutism (it can only be this way) through to relativism (there are different ways of understanding this), through to conviction (this is how I have come to understand this, and here I stand).

Ministers need to have come through this process and to have done so early in their preparation lest at some later point they be taken by surprise by questions they have never asked. Preparation for ministry requires this critical and chastening process, that is to say, the passage from a naïve faith to what has helpfully been called 'the second naivety' (Paul Ricoeur), a place of renewed depth and simplicity that lies beyond the complexity of analytical study. This process is best undertaken in a supportive environment in which those who are familiar with it can support those first encountering it and help to interpret it along the way. Perhaps this is one good reason why our theological colleges should also see themselves as seminaries in which theological study is the handmaiden of a believing church and not an academic end in itself. Socrates was surely right that the unexamined life is not worth living, even when we go on to say with Stanley Hauerwas that the examined life is not a bowl of cherries

either.⁹ But chiefly in this section we must surely stress that theology, though it is certainly concerned with knowledge is above all concerned with the knowledge of God. It is personal, moral and transformative. For this reason, the great Tom Torrance even in a university context always began each lecture with prayer. For the Christian, and above all for the minister, theology can never be merely academic, an exercise in the study of ideas. It is rightly thought of as spiritual theology. On this, Simon Chan has written, '(A)ll theology is or ought to be spiritual... This reflection is not a disinterested observation but a personal engagement with God and with God's glory'.¹⁰ The theological teacher's vocation is to embody this and inspire it in others.

A second obstacle is the unfortunate but, again, far from illusory perception that doctrine divides rather than unites, therefore it is best avoided. Behind such a suspicion is a long and dishonourable history in the church of doctrinal conflict shamefully carried through. John Gray is not the only critic to assert that when faith came to be equated with belief, Christianity became according to him, 'the chief source of the doctrinal violence that has ravaged western civilization ever since'.¹¹ If the present age differs from previous generations, it may be in the more moderate language that we have partially learnt to employ when debating disagreements. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is notable for his insistence that even very divergent views can be debated within the ethos of love.¹² At least, perhaps, we have learnt not to go to war over differences of doctrine. At a more reduced level there have been times in my experience when colleagues have wanted to stake out a 'safe space' for theological discussion perhaps for fear that as they tentatively advanced their own ideas, they might find themselves under

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 76.

¹⁰ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 16.

¹¹ John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 18.

¹² Christopher Landau, *A Theology of Disagreement: New Testament Ethics for Ecclesial Conflicts* (London: SCM, 2020), viii.

attack. Furthermore, we are surrounded by a climate in which diversity, inclusivity and equality are dominant values with the message that we should hold off pointing up differences or ruling anything out of court.

Yet right though this all seems, and popular though this rhetoric might be, not all forms of diversity are compatible with a received identity, and not everything can be included without internal contradiction, and not everything is equal to everything else. There are things worth standing up for. Because the gospel claims to be true, its truth requires defending against teaching judged to be false. There are genuine heresies and pronounced errors to which it would be foolish to be indifferent. Our forebears were clear enough that some things had to be excluded for the sake of those which needed to be included. We have to guard the faith (1 Timothy 6.20). Theology has to be good theology, faithful to its source and not so manipulable that it can justify anything. The question is how to achieve this without betraying the very faith we are guarding. I am reasonably confident that most if not all of us here have at some time been the victims of the kind of *odium theologicum*, theological hatred, that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. McCarthyism is alive and well and unlovely wherever it is found, even when it is proclaimed as righteousness. In its more aggressive forms, it used to live mainly on the more conservative end of the spectrum, but not exclusively so. In our own tradition the reality of two theologically and once divided denominations, the Generals and the Particulars, gradually and effectively gave way to a new consensus in which the older confessions of faith (useful as they still are in my view, and relatively moderate on both sides) yielded place to agreement in ‘those sentiments usually denominated Evangelical’,¹³ which formula still seems to me to be pretty good.

¹³ Richard Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*, (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996), 13. This was part of the wording of the 1835 Constitution of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

It connects of course with the idea of 'able and evangelical ministers' valued in the Bristol Tradition and we may refer at this point to the lapidary statement of Caleb Evans, summarising the intentions of his father Principal Hugh Evans, 'as not merely to form substantial scholars but as far as in him lay he was desirous of being made an instrument in God's hand of forming them, able, evangelical, lively, zealous ministers of the Gospel'.¹⁴ If the word 'able' is worth re-affirming, as we have asserted, so is the word 'evangelical'. If the gospel, the evangel, is that 'God has acted in Jesus Christ personally, decisively and universally in such a way that response to his proclaimed story is definitive for the shape of life on earth and beyond',¹⁵ then the maintenance of evangelical identity is a precondition of Baptist identity. I have been struck both in reading the book by Anthony Cross and other parallel accounts of our history, such for instance as the classic book by A.C. Underwood,¹⁶ sometime principal of Rawdon College, just how important and common the assertion of an evangelical identity has been in our history. The challenge is to embrace this with the generosity that is implied in the gospel of God's gracious love itself. Colin Gunton's earlier quoted statement stressed the promise of theological study; but he went on to identify its peril: 'Its peril', he says, 'lies in seeking confidently to know too much'.¹⁷ When we claim to know too much, we open the door to a new authoritarianism. And the same is true of those opponents of the Christian faith whose atheistic ideology leaves no room for the humility that a proper scientific methodology demands. If the object of theology is to know the true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, the way we pursue this task, and teach others also to do so, must hold firmly to both the grace and the truth that are revealed and enacted in him (John 1.17).

¹⁴ Caleb Evans, 'Elisha's Exclamation: A Sermon Occasioned by the death of Rev. Hugh Evans, preached at Broadmead, Bristol, April 8, 1781.

¹⁵ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 26.

¹⁶ A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Baptist Union, 1947).

¹⁷ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 53.

So, we acknowledge two obstacles in the way to a healthy embrace of theological study. It interests me that whereas our denomination has been quite specific in requiring particular elements in practical ministerial formation, it has had little to say about criteria for either biblical or theological study, other than the formal and modest requirement of a Level 2 qualification and the study of Baptist principles. I am given to believe that at various points discussion has taken place about a contemporary confession of faith that might indicate the material content of a formal qualification but that the enterprise has been either deemed too difficult or too unwise. Just as it would be beneficial to have some specification of what a good Baptist church looks like, so a fuller declaration of the content of faith, of the convictions that most motivate us, could help form the ethos towards which theological education is directed. At the risk of entering this fraught territory, let me make several proposals, broadly conceived, to advance the cause of serious theological engagement combined with a good and right spirit that we might hope could characterise both initial formation and continuing development. And I do this not by constructing an itemised doctrinal statement but by indicating the living traditions of faith and fellowship and theological imagination in which we might wish to stand.

The first is to embrace the term ‘generous orthodoxy’¹⁸ and to use it to indicate a wholehearted commitment to the core beliefs of the Christian church contained in the ecumenical creeds and reflected in the confessions of faith of early Baptists whilst not falling prey to a narrowness of heart and mind that betrays the one who inspires us. We are participants in a human drama throughout history in which the deity of God is at stake; that is to say human history is a contest of competing ideas, one could say a project, as to the nature and character of the deity, and increasingly as to whether any deity even exists. One might also say that within

¹⁸ A phrase first used by Hans Frei, and then by Brian McLaren.

the Christian movement there is a parallel contest concerning how we are to interpret and balance the variance of representations of God that we find within the scriptures we embrace. As Christians we are heirs to a tradition deeply rooted in scripture and consequent theological formulation that claims to be nearer the truth than other perspectives, whatever their merits might be. Yet our commitment to this tradition should be one that embodies the generosity of heart that is itself true to the gracious love of the triune God we confess who has hatred toward none but compassion on all that he has made. The depths and riches of this tradition, which trinitarian doctrine serves to integrate, cannot be over-estimated and in it are resources that have the power to excite, nourish and motivate for a lifetime of service and beyond.

The second proposal is that within this ‘great tradition’ we need to re-embrace the word ‘evangelical’ and to rescue it from the distortions that it has sometimes undergone either in reality or in the perception of others. To be evangelical is to be authentically Protestant. It is worth remembering that in German the word *evangelisch* is the standard word for churches of the Reformation; *evangelisch-freikirchlich* is the designation for free churches. There is pressure to abandon the word in some quarters because of its association with fundamentalism. Currently in the United States some of the people with whom I would most closely identify are advocating ‘after-evangelicalism’ because of the close association of some/many evangelicals with Trumpism.¹⁹ Hugely sympathetic as I am to these concerns what is proposed is surely a dead-end, as much so as was the Social Democratic Party previously or the various groups that abandoned the main parties in the last UK parliament. ‘Red-letter Christianity’, which some propose as a refuge, is never going to make it. There is surely as much good reason to abandon the word ‘Baptist’ as there is the word ‘evangelical’ and for the same reasons that are advanced. Some years ago

¹⁹ As an example see David P. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox Press, 2020).

when there was a former debate about ‘post-evangelicalism’ I made the point that what was needed was not abandonment but faithful re-imagining, and to that position I hold.²⁰ And it is not as though we lack resources for this as might be suggested by terms such as ‘unitive’, ‘centrist’, ‘catholic’, ‘radical’, ‘open’ or ‘progressive’ evangelical. My own conviction is that our own denomination can represent a certain kind of authentic evangelical faith and that will be my third proposal. But at this point as much as I wish to valorise diversity and inclusivity, it is clear to me that these are not virtues in themselves but only make sense as they are firmly and consistently ‘in Christ’, the risen Christ. A ‘safe place’ for our theological explorations is to operate within the capacious boundaries of generous orthodoxy and constructive evangelicalism. A former generation of College principals spoke rightly when in discussing the Declaration of Principle they advocated ‘a strong Christ-centred framework of basic convictions directed towards authentic Christian discipleship and mission.’²¹ Such a statement leaves open the discussion of which those basic convictions are and how far they extend.²² Yet without an ethos of firm agreement about

²⁰ Graham Cray, et al., *The Post-Evangelical Debate* (London: Triangle, 1997), chapter 6.

²¹ Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare*, 8.

²² The Baptist Union appears to have difficulty in coming to a consensus opinion on theological matters, perhaps as a consequence of how it is governed and of the time and patience it requires to embrace theological statements. The widest court of appeal for this activity would need to be the Baptist Union Assembly which raises the question of how easily such a representative body could work with theological ideas and bring them to a conclusion. Perhaps this accounts for some of the nervousness that arises when the issue of a doctrinal basis is raised from time to time. An analogy might however be drawn between the Union and the allegedly unwritten British constitution. Unlike other nations that operate with a written constitution and, say, a penal code, Britain draws upon historic documents such as the Bill of Rights and upon tradition, custom, precedent and both common and statute law. Against the contended claim that Baptists are ‘non-credal’ it can be pointed out that earlier generations have not been slow to draw up confessions of faith as can be demonstrated by reference to books such as W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959, 1969) or, within Europe, G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe: History and Confessions of Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982). It is also consistently

such a basic evangelical heart it seems inevitable that our particular denomination will lose focus and increasingly become a spent force. However, we are as yet far from that point and need never arrive there. Again, the so-called 'Bristol Tradition' has much to offer to the wider 'Baptist tradition.'

So, my third proposal concerns what it means to embody a contemporary and attractive Baptist identity. This is an area that has not been neglected in recent decades. I think we could agree that a maximal reading of Baptist identity places our movement firmly within the great tradition of Christian faith and locates our distinctive convictions as products of our prior understanding of essential Christianity. It is a mistake to detach Baptist identity from the prior theological witness to a God who sets us free that gives rise to it. You may have heard the story of the Mennonite Brethren movement. One particular analysis goes like this: the first generation believed and proclaimed the gospel and thought that there were certain social entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel and advocated the entailments. The third generation denied the gospel and all that were left were the entailments. The fourth generation lost even the entailments because they had lost the gospel. The moral is that our theology cannot afford to be assumed, nor can it exist independently of all that theologically goes before. A healthy Baptist identity requires a lively theological

overlooked that the Baptist Union Assembly has overwhelmingly endorsed specific doctrinal statements such as, in 1918, the 'Declaratory Statement of Common Practice and Faith' of the projected Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches of England, later accepted as the doctrinal basis of the Free Church Federal Council in 1940. This rather fine document is laid out in full as Appendix VIII in Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A short history* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1959), 275-78). Furthermore, in the wake of the Christological controversy of the early 1970s the Assembly massively agreed, 'In particular we assert the unacceptability of any interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ our Lord which would obscure or deny the fundamental tenet of the Christian faith that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, truly God and truly Man' as in Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005), 381. These decisions have never been withdrawn or superseded.

awareness of the whole Christian story. Without it, it will atrophy. My contention is that Baptist identity comprehends both evangelical and liberal dynamics, yet this is liable to distortion if the word ‘liberal’ becomes detached from the word ‘evangelical’. We promote a gospel liberty that affirms that ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery’ (Gal 5.1).

To illustrate the point, I turn to an unusual source and that is the Anglican theologian Theo Hobson, who might accurately be described as a ‘post-Anglican’ because of his trenchant assaults on establishment. In his book *Reinventing Liberal Christianity*, Hobson makes a crucial distinction between good liberalism and bad liberalism. Good liberalism he traces back to what he calls the ‘fragile resistance’ movements of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century and the emerging philosophy of the Baptist (and later Quaker) Roger Williams, the English founder of the state of Rhode Island from 1644. 1644 might sound familiar to us for other reasons but that year also saw the publication by John Milton, reckoned as England’s finest poet after Shakespeare, of his prose work *Areopagitica*, an example of Milton’s ‘persistent radicalism’,²³ in England’s revolutionary age. Although he never joined a Baptist church Milton rejected infant baptism, was opposed to a state church and civil interference in matters of religious belief and preferred congregationalism as a form of church government. On his death, his third wife joined the Baptist church in Nantwich, in whose successor congregation I am occasionally known to preach, and remained part of it until her death.²⁴ According to Hobson, Milton’s argument surpassed that of others in proffering (to England) a positive rationale which allowed the state the privilege of promoting a

²³ Theo Hobson, *Reinventing Liberal Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 62.

²⁴ Underwood, *A History of English Baptists*, 67-68.

new ideology that inverted the old policy of imposing religious uniformity in favour of defending religious liberty.²⁵

Here indeed we have a reformation of the Reformation even if it took some centuries to achieve its goals. This is the ‘good liberalism’ of which Baptists are both progenitors and heirs and that is an essential aspect of Baptist identity. According to Hobson it is not to be identified with ‘bad liberalism’ which is the persistent attempt to reduce Christianity to a form of religious humanism by stripping it of precisely that offensive content that turns out to be in effect the ‘power of God for salvation’. Hobson’s further proposals for sustaining this may not be ours (or mine), but his argument at the very least plays into my argument, which is that true liberty must be evangelical liberty, inspired by and rooted in a firm articulation of the gospel.

These three coordinates, generous orthodoxy, constructive evangelicalism and a contemporary Baptist identity as both evangelical and liberal, form for me the boundaries within which our theological endeavours should fall, the safe space for our theological imaginings. The history of Bristol Baptist College should be a reminder of the crucial role of our seminaries in pursuing these goals. Yet if it begins with them, it does not end with them. Is it too pious a wish to hope that our denominational leaders and regional ministers might be appointed not least with the criterion of theological capacity in view, able to lead and inspire out of a deep theological understanding? To be a theologically literate and excited denomination is not beyond our grasp.

Once more I find myself indebted to Anthony Cross’s work of recovery in *To communicate simply you must understand profoundly*’ for he recalls of Dr Leonard Champion, President of Bristol Baptist College (1953-1972) and of the Baptist Union in 1964, that ‘Champion’s great strength lay in his

²⁵ Hobson develops his argument at length in *Milton’s Vision: The Birth of Christian Liberty* (London: Continuum, 2008). Hobson’s previous book, *Against Establishment: An Anglican Polemic* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003) establishes his reputation as a ‘post-Anglican.’

advocacy of the importance of theology, not just for the ministry, but for the health of the denomination and the church in general'.²⁶ His concern in this respect surfaced in a lecture in 1961 to a Denominational Conference then being held in which he is alleged (by Roger Hayden) to have referred to Baptists as living in a 'theological slum', (a term he later denied having used) and called 'for more and deeper theological thought and study'.²⁷ Of particular significance was a Baptist Historical Society lecture delivered in 1979 at the Baptist Union Assembly and later published in the *Baptist Quarterly* entitled 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life'.²⁸ In this he draw attention to the renewal of theological perspective associated with evangelical Calvinism between 1775 and 1825 leading in turn to the revitalisation of Baptist structures. He advocated a return to these theological distinctives with a view to their re-expression in the contemporary context with an aim once more, to the renewal of denominational structures. There is much in that lecture that I could cheerfully plagiarise for today's occasion. Specifically Dr Champion argued, 'I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new structures of church life as an effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present.' Within this he urged further reflection on the sovereignty of God and the saving activity of God in Christ and through the Spirit.²⁹ It is my firm conviction, along with that of Dr Champion if I understand him aright, that no other constructive possibility is available to us that will readily receive the embrace of the great majority of Baptist people *than a constant re-appropriation of our evangelical identity as I have tried to indicate.*

²⁶ Cross, *To Communicate Simply*, 284.

²⁷ Cross, *To Communicate Simply*, 284.

²⁸ L. G. Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', *Baptist Quarterly* 28.5 (January 1980), 196-208.

²⁹ Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism', 206-207.

Let me draw to a conclusion by pointing to the good and inspiring examples of two of the twentieth century's most influential theologians. The first is Jürgen Moltmann (b 1926) whom I find to be inspiring not least because of his regular biographical references to his own conversion experience. He refers to this again in the introduction to his final so-called 'systematic contribution to theology', *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*.³⁰ As an unwilling soldier in the German Wehrmacht he was taken prisoner at the end of World War II. In a camp in Belgium he was given a Bible by an American chaplain and began to read it for the first time. Through it he found life and hope and went on to study theology as a POW in a camp in Norton near Mansfield set aside for that purpose by the YMCA. He writes, 'Since the moment when I began to study theology . . . everything theological has been for me marvellously new . . . Right down to the present-day theology has continued to be for me a tremendous adventure . . . If I have a theological virtue at all, then it is one that has never hitherto been recognized as such: curiosity'. I particularly identified with his words, 'At a time when so many colleagues are concerned solely with questions of method, what interests me are theological ideas'. All who are acquainted with Moltmann's work can perhaps recognise this excitement even if they believe that sometimes he speculates further than divine revelation entitles him to do. He himself acknowledges the danger 'always to surf theologically on the last wave of the *Zeitgeist*'.³¹ But such excitement about the ever-glorious God seems to me to be where we want to be — in the lecture room, and in the study, and in the pulpit, and in the small group — excitement in the ideas that belief in the God of the gospel provokes within us.

And Moltmann's slightly disparaging comment about the practitioners of 'theological method' suggest our second exemplar. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that he had in mind his contemporary Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014)

³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (ET, London: SCM, 1996). See also Moltmann's autobiography, *A Broad Place* (London: SCM, 2007).

³¹ Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 263.

who was massively concerned with theological method and its interaction with all those other methods that are part of the human search for understanding. At about the age of sixteen on returning from a music lesson he had an intensely religious experience he later called his 'light experience'. Seeking to understand it, he began to search through the works of great philosophers and religious thinkers which resulted in his self-described 'intellectual conversion', in which he concluded that Christianity was the best available religious option. This propelled him into his vocation as a theologian and as such an overriding concern was to demonstrate that Christianity is above all *true*. As he puts it in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, '(D)ogmatics may not presuppose the divine truth which the Christian doctrinal tradition claims. Theology has to present, test, and if possible confirm the claim. It must treat it, however, as an open question and not decide it in advance. Its concern must be that in the course of all its thinking and arguments the rightness of the claim is at issue'.³² God, as Pannenberg frequently repeats, is the 'all-determining reality' (*die alles bestimmende Wirklichkeit*) and as such alone makes sense of everything that is and can reasonably be shown to do so even if the final verification of its truth must await the eschaton.

This also seems to me to be a word for today. Theology should excite as per Moltmann, but it should also make sense of the way things are and persuade. This is particularly so in an age when the common assumption that Christianity is not true, that, for instance, 'science has disproved all that', keeps people at such a distance that they never discover for themselves the riches of Christian belief. How do we fashion a Christian ministry that is adequate for this dual challenge of the inspiration of theological ideas and the ability to persuade? The lucid proclamation of the Christian faith, it is sometimes said, is the most effective form of apologetic. It lies in the effective articulation of Christian ideas, letting

³² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (ET, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 50.

them speak for themselves and do their work in people's mind and heart.

In both the Bristol Tradition and the Baptist traditions we should continue to aspire to be able and evangelical, even learned, godly and zealous, that along with others we may fight the good fight of faith.

Note on the Author

Nigel Wright was Principal of Spurgeon's College, 2000-2013 and President of the Baptist Union 2002-2003. He has written numerous books, including *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Paternoster, 2005).

