

The Politics of Disagreement in the Body of Christ

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Abstract

This article¹ builds upon my 2022 Whitley Lecture asking how Baptists deal with the politics of disagreement. Like the Whitley Lecture, it uses the Baptist Union of Great Britain's Declaration of Principle as a means of suggesting a set of virtues — humility, patience, hope, grace, love, and peace — that should characterise how we approach and discuss areas where we disagree.

Keywords

Disagreement; politics; Declaration of Principle

Introduction

To talk about the church being political can be understood in different ways. It can mean the ways that the church engages in political issues and questions; for example, the way the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) contributes to the important work of the Joint Public Issues Team.² It can also be used as a way of describing how the church can resemble what we see in the politics of parliament, that is, the disagreement, division, and hostility that emerges between political parties. This appears more extreme in the UK parliament and its equivalent in the United States of America, where two parties dominate and rarely has there been a need for coalition with other parties. In our own Baptist life, at least in England, and mirroring other church denominations, the ongoing response to LGBT inclusion feels deeply

¹ This article is an expansion of a short piece originally published in the *Baptist Times* on the 28 April 2022 <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/634708/The_Church_is.aspx>.

² The Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) is a partnership between the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, and the United Reformed Church, founded in 2007. The purpose of JPIT is to help the churches work together for peace and justice through listening, learning, praying, speaking, and acting on public policy issues. See 'About us', The Joint Public Issues Team <<https://jpit.uk/about-us>> [accessed 11 April 2023].

political, with different positions and groupings seeking to initiate or resist change.³ Agendas are in play. Rules and policies are contested and competing visions or stories are marshalled around what it is to be truly Baptist.⁴ There is a sense from some that Christians should rise above politics, that politics is close to being a dirty word, or at least no word fit for the Christian life.

In my 2022 Whitley Lecture, I argued that to be Christians, to be churches, is to be unavoidably political.⁵ I wanted to reclaim politics as something to be engaged with rather than pretending it can be avoided. Politics is simply the name we give to the way we relate together as people who share something in common. It is the practices, following Luke Bretherton, that enable us to negotiate a shared life in the face of disagreement and differences, some of which can be, or can feel, inevitable and/or intractable.⁶ The question is not whether we should be political, but what kind of politics we should inhabit and embody. For Baptists, to name our life (as churches, Associations, Unions, and as a European Baptist Federation) as political is to free us to recognise that disagreement and differences are to be expected as we seek to follow in common the one we name Lord and Saviour. This is true where Baptists engage in ecumenism.⁷ The ecumenical breakthroughs of the twentieth century⁸ — the birth of the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches — demonstrated an ecclesial politics that sought to heal a long history of division and pursue greater

³ For one account of how Baptists have responded to same-sex relationships, see Andy Goodliff, 'Baptists and Same-Sex Relationships: A Brief History', *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, 353 (January 2022), 9–19.

⁴ For an earlier attempt to navigate this particular disagreement, see 'The Courage to be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality', *Baptist Quarterly*, 48, no. 1 (January 2017), 2–10. The statement was authored by Beth Allison-Glenny, Andy Goodliff, Ruth Gouldbourne, Steve Holmes, David Kerrigan, Glen Marshall, and Simon Woodman.

⁵ Andy Goodliff, *The Ruling Christ and the Witnessing Church: Towards a Baptist Political Theology*, The 2022 Whitley Lecture (Oxford: Whitley, 2022).

⁶ See Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), p. 34.

⁷ On Baptists and ecumenism see Steven Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

⁸ In which European Baptists have played a significant role, e.g. Ernest Payne (WCC), Glen Garfield Williams (CEC), Morris West (WCC), Myra Blyth (WCC), and Keith Clements (CEC).

unity. Difference and disagreement are still present, as they are within all denominations.

Disagreements and differences are to be expected because we are human beings, all of whom fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). While the Apostle Paul says we have, by the Holy Spirit, access to the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16), our minds are those that are being renewed (Rom 12:2). We know in part; one day we shall know in full (1 Cor 13:12). Attending to Christ, to the Bible, and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit this side of Christ's return, will produce disagreement and difference. Most of the time, this is something we live with; our politics allow us to maintain unity at little cost. There is an implicit sense that we feel that we are more alike than we are different, although this is largely assumed and rarely tested. Where disagreement does emerge we do not see it generally as a dividing issue, but one in which we are able to practise a degree of tolerance.

Nigel Wright, in a discussion of tolerance in the church, distinguishes between dogma, doctrine, and opinion.⁹ Not all is dogma and not all is opinion. There can be no toleration, he says, on what is deemed dogma, for this is the core of Christian belief, expressed primarily in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,¹⁰ but Christians can live with disagreement on doctrine and opinion. Doctrines are those beliefs added to the dogmatic core by a denominational movement. For Baptists, this would be primarily around believer's baptism and the autonomy of the local church, but this is not a bar to ecumenical relations with other Free Churches and denominations. Within a denomination, determining what counts as doctrine and what counts as opinion is the challenge. So, for example, for Baptists is the theology of marriage a doctrine or is there room for a range of opinion? This is a

⁹ Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 220–224.

¹⁰ Of course, historically, Baptists have been suspicious of any required subscription to creeds, while at the same, they have been 'acknowledged as trustworthy witnesses to faith' (Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), p. 9).

current area of disagreement within the BUGB.¹¹ Wright warns of making ‘interpretative opinion a test of orthodoxy’ and urges for what he calls ‘the exercise of productive tolerance within an overall firm commitment to Christian dogma’.¹² He recognises this is a ‘precarious venture’ and, as such, ‘demands much grace’, but this is what discipleship is.¹³ Elsewhere, Wright argues that ‘the church of tomorrow will have to learn the skills of careful ethical consideration and debate’, which will require, he says, ‘maturity, wisdom and skill’.¹⁴

Disagreement and difference can sometimes be something that feels more difficult to tolerate. We are living through one of these situations with regard to the understanding of marriage and same-sex relationships. How do we cope theologically with disagreement and with difference? This is both a question for each Christian denomination as well as for churches ecumenically. How can we love one another in the face of profound disagreement? These questions are now being addressed by theologians, as seen in the recent work of James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* and Christopher Landau, *A Theology of Disagreement: New Testament Ethics for Ecclesial Conflicts*.¹⁵

I believe that we can find the resources and practices within our Baptist politics. Other church traditions will have their own resources, as can be seen, for example, in Bretherton’s descriptions of Pentecostalism, Anglicanism, and Roman Catholicism.¹⁶ In my Whitley Lecture, I highlighted four elements to a Baptist politics present in the BUGB’s Declaration of Principle, which is the stated basis of our

¹¹ Currently, BUGB churches can opt to register their buildings for same-sex weddings. However, accredited ministers are unable to enter into a same-sex marriage due to the existing ministerial rules, which define marriage exclusively as between a man and a woman.

¹² Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 223.

¹³ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, pp. 223–224.

¹⁴ Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 149.

¹⁵ James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017); Christopher Landau, *A Theology of Disagreement: New Testament Ethics for Ecclesial Conflicts* (London: SCM, 2021). See also, *The Morally Divided Body: Ethical Disagreement and the Disunity of the Church*, ed. by James Buckley and Michael Root (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) and Mike Highton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (London: T & T Clark, 2020), chapter 8.

¹⁶ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, chapters 4, 5, and 6.

unity.¹⁷ These four elements are both a statement of belief¹⁸ and a set of practices¹⁹ which contain a call to be communities with a particular character.²⁰ We might say that the Declaration of Principle has what Ellen Charry has called a pastoral (or practical) function.²¹ Christopher Ellis likewise argues that it is ‘an expression of spirituality, because it combines belief with practice’.²² It was worded to guide its constituent churches, associations, and colleges into a shared life that could flourish together under the rule of Christ.²³ It is convictional theology and these convictions are an ‘ethical commitment’. In this article, I want to offer a way of seeing the Declaration of Principle as pastoral and ethical, where its theological beliefs cannot be separated from theological virtues.²⁴ If this is understood, this should shape the way disagreements

¹⁷The Baptist Union of Great Britain:

<https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx>.

The Declaration of Principle in its current form can be traced back to 1904, with small, but important revisions made in 1906, 1938 and 2009. For the history, see *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, ed. by Richard Kidd (Oxford: Whitley, 1996), pp. 17–25. For an engagement with the wording of the Declaration of Principle, especially its first clause, see Jeff Jacobson, ‘An Exploration of the First Clause of the Declaration of Principle’, in *Attending to the Margins: Essays in Honour of Stephen Finamore*, ed. by Helen Paynter and Peter Hatton (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2022), pp. 253–276. There is hopefully some overlap with core principles found in other European and global Baptist bodies.

¹⁸It may not be a Confession of Faith but it is none the less notably theological and identifies an authentic expression of Baptist ecclesiology’ (Kidd, *Something to Declare*, p. 24).

¹⁹The practices are congregational discernment, baptism, and witnessing.

²⁰The phrasing here echoes Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). For more on the language of practices, see James McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, rev. edn (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) and *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Vol. 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); and more recently Ryan Andrew Newson, *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018).

²¹See Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²²Christopher Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004), p. 233.

²³The current wording of the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s vision is *growing healthy churches in relationship for God’s mission*.

²⁴Other Baptists offer a virtue ecclesiology. See John Colwell, *Living the Christian Story* (Edinburgh; T & T Clark, 2001) and *The Rhythm of Doctrine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007); and Paul Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017). For one theological account of a range of virtues, see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Character of Virtue: Letters to a Godson* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

are approached and conducted between Baptists themselves and between Baptists and other ecumenical partners.

The Authority of Christ and Humility

The Declaration of Principle begins by recognising the authority of Christ,²⁵ which I suggest should produce in us humility: Christ is Lord, we are not. Humility begins in seeing that authority does not belong to us.²⁶ We are placed in a position under Christ.²⁷ As Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, ‘I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’ (2:20). I am — we are — now a self-in-relation to Christ.²⁸ This humility is lived out by recognising, with Brian Haymes, that ‘all our theologies must have a provisionality about them’.²⁹ Haymes continues,

Tentativeness is not a mild form of sin but might be the expression of serious searching faith. Hence, in Baptist theology, there will be a recognition of plurality and we shall be properly wary of those who wish to squeeze us into their own mould.³⁰

This is to practise humility. Where we disagree, rather than *lord* our viewpoint over the other (Mark 10:42), we are called to practise a humility of speech, taking care with how we speak to one another. As Nicholas Lash says,

²⁵ ‘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 [...]’ (Declaration of Principle, article 1).

²⁶ ‘There is a demand which God-in-Christ makes upon us which can only be expressed by use of the language of authority, obedience, submission and duty’ (Nigel Wright, ‘Spirituality as Discipleship’, in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2008), pp. 79–101 (p. 91). For two wonderful accounts of humility, see Samuel Wells, *Walk Humbly* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2019) and Stephen Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²⁷ The phrase that Baptists have often used is ‘under the rule of Christ’. For a discussion of this in terms of a Baptist spirituality, see *Under the Rule of Christ*, ed. by Fiddes.

²⁸ On this verse, see Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 151–175.

²⁹ Brian Haymes, ‘Theology and Baptist Identity’, in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Whitley, 2000), pp. 1–5 (p. 5).

³⁰ Haymes, ‘Theology and Baptist Identity’, p. 5.

Commissioned as ministers of God's redemptive Word, we are required, in politics and in private life, in work and play, in commerce and scholarship, to practice and foster that philology, that word-caring, that meticulous and conscientious concern for the quality of conversation and truthfulness of memory, which is the first casualty of sin. The Church, accordingly, is or should be a school of philology, an academy of word-care.³¹

If Lash is right to name the church as a school of philology, then worship is our classroom. In worship, we learn words of welcome, praise, lament, confession, thanksgiving, intercession, and blessing. As Stanley Hauerwas says, 'liturgy is the source of word-care necessary for our lives to be beautiful and good'.³² How we speak to one another also requires humility in how we listen to one another. Disagreement is often exacerbated because of a failure to properly listen to what others are saying. A posture that begins by listening is one that values others, as Bretherton outlines:

To truly listen necessitates taking seriously who is before us and attending to that situation [...] action born out of listening acts in trust that others not like me might have something to teach me. In short, it demands humility to recognize that, whatever the justice of my cause or coherence of my program, I could be wrong, and I don't know all there is to know about how to live well.³³

This humility extends not only to how we speak and to how we listen but also to how we read and interpret Holy Scripture. In the Declaration, the authority of Christ is linked to the revelation of Scripture,³⁴ but that which is revealed in scripture, Baptists claim, requires interpretation.³⁵ There should be an appropriate humility in

³¹ Nicholas Lash, 'Ministry of the Word or Comedy and Philology', *New Blackfriars*, 68 (1987), 472–483 (p. 477), cited in Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 164.

³² Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 163.

³³ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, p. 453. See Newson, *Inhabiting the World* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018) for a Baptist theology that emphasises listening.

³⁴ 'That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ [...] is the sole and absolute authority [...] as revealed in the Holy Scriptures [...]' (Declaration of Principle, article 1). Key here is that no Scripture has any authority independent of Christ: 'The exclusivity of Scripture as the basis for Christian thought and practice is not derived from its own identity, considered in isolation, but is a function of its relationship to the Lord' (Grant Macaskill, *The New Testament and Intellectual Humility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 209.

³⁵ '[...] 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' (Declaration of Principle, article 1).

what we claim is the meaning and truth of Scripture. As John Webster argues regarding Scripture,

We do not read well; and we do not read well, not only because of technical incompetence, cultural distance from the substance of the text or lack of readerly sophistication, but also and most of all because in reading Scripture we are addressed by that which runs clean counter to our will [...] Reading Scripture is thus best understood as an aspect of mortification and vivification: to read Scripture is to be slain and made alive.³⁶

In the face of disagreement, which is to be expected, we should show more humility in what we can say of God and of revelation in Scripture. This should not be read that we can say nothing but, rather, as an argument for *how* we say what we believe we interpret and understand.³⁷

Baptist theologians Nigel Wright and Brian Haymes have both used a word that is helpfully related to humility: ‘modest’. Wright, in a chapter called ‘The Courage to be Modest’, defines modest as ‘the style and manner with which we hold and advocate [...] doctrine in the contemporary world’.³⁸ He says, ‘The historical ambiguities of the church, its present failures, and our awareness of our frail humanity mean that the voice with which we speak is tempered.’³⁹ Haymes writes of ‘The Way of Practical Modesty’ and argues that ‘there is a necessary tentativeness in religious believing, that lives with doubt, seeing as in a mirror, dimly (1 Cor 13.12)’.⁴⁰

³⁶ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 87–88.

³⁷ For further discussion see Sean Winter, *More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective*, The Whitley Lecture, 2007 (Oxford: Whitley, 2007) and Sean Winter, ‘Persuading Friends: Friendship and Testimony in Baptist Interpretative Communities’, in *The “Plainly Revealed” Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp. 253–270.

³⁸ Wright, *New Baptists*, p. 31.

³⁹ Wright, *New Baptists*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Brian Haymes, ‘The Way of Practical Modesty’, in *Wisdom, Science and the Scriptures: Essays in Honour of Ernest Lucas*, ed. by Stephen Finamore and John Weaver (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2012), pp. 99–116 (p. 114). Elsewhere, Haymes names modesty as ‘a mark of spiritual maturity’ (‘Still Blessing the Tie that Binds’, in *For the Sake of the Church: Essays in Honour of Paul Fiddes*, ed. by Anthony Clarke (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2014), pp. 91–102 (p. 99).

Humility — modesty — should be the first virtue that shapes the way we approach and engage in our disagreements.

Congregational Government, Patience, and Hope

Second, the Declaration of Principle recognises the liberty of the local church to discern⁴¹ — the practice of congregational government — which should form us in the virtue of patience. Alan Kreider has shown that in the early church patience was seen as ‘the greatest of all virtues’ and, as a result, they as the church, ‘trusting God, should be patient — not controlling events, not anxious or in a hurry, and never using force to achieve their ends’.⁴² We are patient in disagreement, believing in the possibility that by listening, worshipping, and living alongside one another, and waiting on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this can lead to places not yet seen. Patience is required because the discernment of the church is often an expression of ‘slow wisdom’.⁴³

Stephen Pickard in his book *Seeking the Church*, compares three types of church: the fast-asleep church, the frenetic church, and the slow church.⁴⁴ The fast-asleep church is one in thrall to what is perceived as an unchanging tradition and refuses to entertain any kind of need to change. The frenetic church is one that lurches from one idea or programme to the next and is all too happy to undergo change. Baptists can be both kinds. We are more likely to be the second, but examples of the first exist. Pickard’s third type of church, named slow, is one that recognises that things take time and that the church is always ‘incomplete and contingent’.⁴⁵ Slow church is one that is travelling, but not so fast that those who are settled are left behind, and not so slow

⁴¹ ‘[...] each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws’ (Declaration of Principle, article 2).

⁴² Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), p. 2.

⁴³ I am leaning here on Ruth Moriarty’s forthcoming doctoral research into how church meetings in Baptist churches discern, which she names ‘slow wisdom’.

⁴⁴ Stephen Pickard, *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2012), pp. 210–239.

⁴⁵ Pickard, *Seeking the Church*, p. 228.

that the pioneers get too far ahead.⁴⁶ To note another book by John Swinton, the practice of congregational government is about *Becoming Friends of Time*.⁴⁷ Swinton argues against a view of the tyranny of time, instead claiming that time is a gift. Where we disagree, we cannot go to sleep and we cannot rush to answers. What is required is patience, as we, slowly, take the time to pray,⁴⁸ to listen, and to seek ways forward.

Patience of this kind will be costly, sometimes more for some than for others. Here I point to the recent work of Paul Dafydd Jones, *Patience: A Theological Exploration*, and his discussion of patience as a ‘burdened virtue’.⁴⁹ Jones writes that ‘patience is a term that has been embedded in a program defined by mystifying justifications, shoddy history, and ethical donothingism’.⁵⁰ This is to acknowledge that the call to patience might sometimes be justly countered by an impatience to an inertness that will not even accept the possibility of needing to engage in meaningful conversation. When some want simply to go to sleep, the appropriate response can be to wake them up, to summon them to listen.

Given the sacrificial nature of patience, it should be accompanied by the virtue of hope, a hope that resides in Christ (Col 1:27). Hope here is not optimism, what Hauerwas called ‘hope without truth’,⁵¹ but hope in Christ, who died, was raised, is ascended, and will come again. We wait in patient hope, acknowledging that ‘the history of redemption has not yet reached its conclusion’.⁵² We wait in patient hope knowing that our discernment is not infallible nor ultimate; instead

⁴⁶ The language of travelling, settlers, and pioneers I owe to David Coffey.

⁴⁷ John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (London: SCM, 2017).

⁴⁸ Prayer is not mentioned in the Declaration of Principle, but it is perhaps implicit in the phrase ‘the guidance of the Holy Spirit’. Prayer is both an act of humility and of patience. For an account of prayer that I think is helpful, see Norman Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community and the Land* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), pp. 61–86.

⁴⁹ Paul Dafydd Jones, *Patience: A Theological Exploration* (London: T & T Clark, 2022), p. 9. Jones borrows the language of ‘burdened’ from Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ Jones, *Patience*, p. 272.

⁵¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1988), p. 95, cited in John Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp. 24–25.

⁵² Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine*, p. 22.

we walk in ways known and *to be made known*.⁵³ The virtues of patience and hope should counsel us to see that, while our disagreements can be deep, it does not mean we should give up lightly on fellowship at the Lord's table or in the church meeting, council, or assembly, whether between Baptists only, or at the wider ecumenical table.⁵⁴

Baptism, Grace, and Politics

Third, the Declaration of Principle names the practice of believer's baptism,⁵⁵ which, of course, is to name an area of ecumenical disagreement.⁵⁶ Baptism in the New Testament is always ethical — in baptism, an old life is put to death and a new life is received (Rom 6:1–12; Col 2:12), and we are clothed with a new set of habits (Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27; Col 3:12). In baptism, we are transformed into the 'realm of grace' and a new community is 'created by grace'. In John Barclay's words, "Those who have received [grace] are to remain within it, their lives altered by new habits, new dispositions, and new practices of grace."⁵⁷ This surely, then, has implications when our ways of being church (from local to global) face disagreement within themselves. Baptised into grace, putting on Christ, calls us to be gracious:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph 4:32)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each

⁵³ See Ernest A. Payne, *Ways Known and To Be Made Known*, Presidential Address (London: Baptist Union, 1977); and also Anthony R. Cross, "'Through a Glass Darkly': The Further Light Clause in Baptist Thought", in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2011), pp. 92–118.

⁵⁴ For a powerful picture of the table, see Paul Bayes, *The Table* (London: DLT, 2019), pp. 2–5.

⁵⁵ "That Christian baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ[...]" (Declaration of Principle, article 2).

⁵⁶ In *Something to Declare*, Kidd et al. offer a reading of this article with an openness to baptism in other forms (p. 38). See also, Paul Fiddes, 'Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation', *Ecumenical Review*, 54, no. 1 (2002), 49–65.

⁵⁷ Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, p. 149.

other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Col 3:12–13)

“There is no possibility here of “cheap grace””,⁵⁸ writes Barclay. If baptism immerses us in grace, we cannot help but be gracious in word and deed. This is an ‘ongoing process’⁵⁹ of conversion in our lives. As Colwell notes, ‘Baptism is not so much a first step on the pathway of discipleship and obedience as it is the means through which we are set on that pathway of discipleship and obedience.’⁶⁰ Those baptised into Christ and his church are ‘placed into a context [...] through which the theological virtues [...] can be nurtured and can grow’.⁶¹

The language above of ‘one another’ and ‘each other’ is a reminder that our baptism is into the body of Christ, into a new community, into a new set of relationships. Baptism is not a purely individual affair but something deeply communal — grace and love are tied to fellowship (2 Cor 13:14). While Baptists have given renewed attention to covenant and the way church, association, and union call us into covenant relationship,⁶² the basis of that covenant is our baptism into Christ — baptism is the tie that binds us together (Col 4:4–6).⁶³ Colwell has noted with regards to baptism that ‘many contemporary Baptists are often strangely muted concerning their defining distinctive’.⁶⁴ His point is that Baptists are in the strange position where some ‘do not ultimately insist on baptism at all’. I want to make a

⁵⁸ Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, p. 90. ‘Cheap grace’ being a phrase coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer; see *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 2015; first published in 1959).

⁵⁹ Myles Wentz, ‘Light for Navigating Moral Disagreement’, in *Sources of Light: Resources for Baptist Churches Practicing Theology*, ed. by Amy L. Chilton and Steven R. Harmon (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2020), pp. 230–240 (p. 233). See also Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, pp. 76–100, who speaks of conversion as a ‘process of reorientation and *disorientation*’.

⁶⁰ John Colwell, *Promise and Presence* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), p. 131.

⁶¹ Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, p. 131.

⁶² See here various writings of Paul Fiddes, especially *Tracks and Traces*.

⁶³ Here I would argue that the Declaration of Principle needs to be strengthened by a separate article or an addition to the article on baptism which mentions the Lord’s Supper. For some helpful recent work on Baptists and the Lord’s Supper, see Ashley Lovett, “‘To Become the Future Now’: Baptists Being Shaped by the Table”, in *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honor of Christopher J. Ellis*, ed. by Myra Blyth and Andy Goodliff (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), pp. 153–171; and Lovett, ‘Baptists on the Lord’s Supper and Christian Character’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 50, no. 4 (October 2019), 155–169.

⁶⁴ Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, p. 109.

different point and suggest that too often we have ‘too little’⁶⁵ an expectation of, and theology concerning, baptism. We have not properly recognised and articulated the (theological) politics of baptism.⁶⁶ The politics of baptism is that by grace we have been made part of a more ‘determinative body’⁶⁷ — the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). Baptism gives us a new identity and a new community: we are a new politics in the world.⁶⁸ That politics is founded on grace and forgiveness. This is not optional; kindness and forgiveness⁶⁹ are ‘a *necessary* component of grace’.⁷⁰ Where we are in disagreement, what does it mean to show grace to one another?

Christian Witness, Love, and Peace

Fourth, the Declaration of Principle recognises the duty (and joy) of Christian witness,⁷¹ which calls us, I suggest, to the virtues of love and peace. This third article of the declaration reminds us that the church lives in the world and as such our disagreements almost always take place in public, and so how we handle them is a witness to the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is a demonstration of God’s love (John 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 John 3:16) and peace (Rom 5:1; Eph 2:14–17; Col 1:20) and it is through the witness and life of the

⁶⁵ Brian Haymes, ‘Making Too Little and Too Much of Baptism’, in *Ecumenism and History: Essays in Honour of John H. Y. Briggs*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 175–189.

⁶⁶ For one account, see Brian Haymes, ‘Baptism as a Political Act’, in *Reflections on the Waters: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers*, ed. by Paul Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1996), pp. 69–84. See also Goodliff, *The Ruling Christ*, pp. 24–28.

⁶⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 24.

⁶⁸ The phrasing here is deliberate. It is not that we have a politics, but that we are politics, which relates to the point that Hauerwas has famously argued: ‘the church does have a social ethic, it is a social ethic’.

⁶⁹ The Baptist Haddon Willmer has written compellingly about the possibilities of what he calls the ‘politics of forgiveness’. See Haddon Willmer, ‘The Politics of Forgiveness — A New Dynamic’, *Furrow* (1979), 207–218, and *Forgiveness and Politics* (Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, 2003).

⁷⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, p. 125.

⁷¹ ‘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’ (Declaration of Principle, article 3).

church that the world knows this gospel of love and peace. As Colwell writes, ‘Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world.’⁷² The content of the gospel and its character are the same. The gospel of God’s love and peace demands a church that bears witness in its own life to that love and peace. The witness of the church is not something the church only believes, but it is something the church becomes.⁷³

‘Love one another’, says Jesus in the gospel of John (John 15:17). As George Beasley-Murray comments, ‘The injunction to love is the first and last word of Christ to his friends.’⁷⁴ Love here is joined with friendship. The church is a community of friends, not first of our doing, but that of Christ: ‘I have called you friends’ (John 15:15).⁷⁵ Friendship is something given; it is the gift of the gospel. The gospel is characterised by love, and therefore people of the gospel must be those who demonstrate love to one another, to their neighbours, and to their enemies. Love here is not of a sentimental kind, but is love that is defined in and by the gospel story, which we name as grace, and is ‘marked by uncalculating generosity’.⁷⁶ Disagreement is not always resolvable, but we can pursue what has been called ‘loving disagreement’.⁷⁷

Love is related to peace and we are encouraged to live at peace (Rom 12:18; 2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 5:13) and make every effort to do what leads to peace (Rom 15:19). This is possible because Jesus is our peace (Eph 2:14; 2 Thess 3:16) and has given us that gift through the

⁷² Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, p. 85.

⁷³ See Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

⁷⁴ George Beasley-Murray, *John*. Word Biblical Commentary, 2nd edn (Dallas, TX: Word, 1999), p. 275.

⁷⁵ For a Baptist account of ecclesial friendship, see Lina Toth, ‘Befriending Churches’, in *Seeds of the Church: Towards an Ecumenical Baptist Ecclesiology*, ed. by Teun van der Leer, Henk Bakker, Steven R. Harmon, and Elizabeth Newman (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), pp. 67–77.

⁷⁶ Colwell, *Rhythm of Doctrine*, p. 43; see pages 39–44 for Colwell’s treatment of the virtue of love.
⁷⁷ See Landau, *A Theology of Disagreement* and his John Stott London Lecture, 10 November 2022 <https://licc.org.uk/resources/loving-disagreement-christian-wisdom-for-a-polarised-world/> [accessed 11 April 2023].

cross (Col 1:20; Eph 2:1–16; Rom 5:1).⁷⁸ This leads Hauerwas to claim that peace-making is a virtue ‘intrinsic to the nature of the church’.⁷⁹ Our goal should be peace and our approach to disagreement should be marked by peaceful words and actions.

Conclusion

This article, like my Whitley Lecture, seeks to make a modest contribution: our character as Christians should shape how we approach and engage in disagreement.⁸⁰ We disagree strongly as Baptists and between Christians of all denominations. Our differences on some matters run deep, particularly at the current time in response to same-sex relationships. Reconciliation of these disagreements does not seem straightforwardly forthcoming. The question is, does our reconciliation that is visible in our confession of one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Eph 4:4–6), enable us, or perhaps demand us, to remain in union even if that unity is under pressure? Do our politics, rooted in the virtues of humility, patience, grace, love, and peace — virtues witnessed in the life of Jesus — give hope that we can love one another with integrity without agreement on every issue?

The church is political. We are fallen, finite, and forgiven. We are a people on the way and in the fray.⁸¹ We are people of conversation and conversion. We are learning to love God and to love neighbour. Let me conclude with a quote from Colin Gunton, one of my favourite theologians (and teachers): ‘[The Spirit] liberates us, by bringing us into community: by enabling us to be *with* and *for* the brothers and sisters

⁷⁸ For a theological account of peace, see John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), pp. 150–170.

⁷⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1988), p. 95.

⁸⁰ Against those who accuse him of sectarianism, Hauerwas says, ‘I have never sought to justify Christian withdrawal from social and political involvement; I have just wanted us to be involved as Christians’ (*A Better Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000), p. 24). This article attempts to make a similar argument.

⁸¹ To borrow the title of Helen Dare’s helpful 2014 Whitley Lecture.

whom we do not ourselves choose.⁸² I pray that might be true of us who are Baptists, both denominationally and ecumenically.

⁸² Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 201.