On What Do We Agree?: The Idea of the Normative in British Baptist Life

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Abstract
This article seeks to explore what might be considered normative in British Baptist life. It seeks to explore behind the *Declaration of Principle* and argues that the foundation statement is the multi-dimensional confession 'Jesus is Lord' and examines the particular way that this has been understood by Baptists, discussing some implications of this for individuals, local churches, and a union of churches. It then suggests that the *Declaration of Principle* is one way that the confession 'Jesus is Lord' is further explicated but that as a contingent and contextual document, it could be developed in different ways, and the article ends by considering some of the current issues that have been addressed to the *Declaration of Principle*.

Keywords
Baptist identity; lordship of Christ; *Declaration of Principle*; normativity

Introduction

What is 'normative' in Christian theology? By normative here I mean something that is agreed together to be authoritative. Or to put it differently, what do we take to be normative? The phrasing of these two forms of the question alerts us to important issues. The first question offers a more objective approach, suggesting that there is that which is appropriately, even universally, normative — in other words there is agreed theology which stands over us and to which we adhere. The second question reframes this more subjectively, recognising that the normative may be that which I, or we, choose as much as that which compels me from outside.[1] The distinction between the two aspects is

[1] See Stephen P. Turner, *Explaining the Normative* (Polity Press, 2010) for a broader philosophical discussion of the wide use of normative ideas.

not always straight forward as they are constantly intertwined; a church, for example, might choose to accept a confessional statement as normative, on the basis of its content, which then functions for that group in a more objective way.

The concept of 'normative' theology as a phrase has become more significant through the development of models of practical theology such as the *Four Voices* developed by Helen Cameron and others, which lists the normative voice alongside the espoused, operant, and formal.[2] When using this model in the past, I have suggested that the 'normative' voice might be reframed for British Baptists as a 'representative' voice, on the basis that there is in fact very little that can be definitively described as normative — it is really only the *Declaration of Principle* [3] — but there is much more that is clearly 'representative'.[4] Often documents, such as those agreed by the Baptist Union Council, emerge from a wider process of deliberation and so have a genuinely shared sense of authorship. But they do not have the status of being 'normative' in the sense of being authoritative and binding for churches. If much of what British Baptists rely on is better described as representative rather than normative, what can we suggest is, or ought to be, normative for British Baptist life?

In wrestling with questions of normativity, Nigel Wright declares that 'Baptists are orthodox Christians, more than willing to affirm the faith of the church expressed in, for instance, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds'.[5] I have no wish to question the place of Baptists within wider orthodoxy, but it does beg the question of who decides, both for this generic group called 'Baptists' and for the wider church.

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[2] Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (SCM, 2010), pp. 53–56.

[3] See, 'Declaration of Principle', Baptists Together, n.d. <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx> [accessed 23 September 2024]; for the Baptist Union of Scotland's slightly different version, see 'Who We Are', Baptist Union of Scotland, n.d. <https://scottishbaptist.com/about-us/who-we-are/> [accessed 23 September 2024]. Other Unions or Conventions will have different normative documents.

[4] See the discussion in Anthony Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders: An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges* (Wipf and Stock, 2021), pp. 19–20; and Anthony Clarke, 'Listening to the Voices', in *Sharing Faith at the Boundaries of Unity*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Regent's Park College, 2019), pp. 150–172 (p. 153).

[5] Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Paternoster, 2005), p. 39.

Wright's point is that while historically Baptists have at times been considered unorthodox by others, an assessment of four hundred years of Baptist history suggests an agreement with certain key texts within the universal church. So, in stating categorically that 'Baptists are orthodox', Wright is not only making an assessment of Baptist belief, he is doing so against an assumed wider standard of normativity, as if there is an agreed plumbline (we might say 'canon' as this is its original meaning) of orthodoxy against which Baptists can measure themselves. But if so, who has set this canon of orthodoxy and what does it include?

At this point it is helpful to explore three short diversions: knowledge, Scripture, and tradition. The first issue takes us into the philosophical realm of knowledge and how we know anything. To claim that there is a definitive and normative Christian orthodoxy and to claim that it is possible for me to know definitively this orthodoxy are two different things; and different again from a third position that claims there is no definitive truth anyway. The first position is often described as a realist position, the second as a critical realist position, and the third as a constructionist position.[6] Although we might not express it in these terms, embedded in how we see the world will be a tendency to take one of these positions. In this article, I explicitly take a critical realist position that believes that there is objective truth but recognises that my grasp on this is only ever limited and partial.[7]

Second, together with Baptists over the centuries, I want to uphold the vital and unique importance of Scripture in any theological discussion; but simply stating that Scripture is normative leaves us with as many questions as answers. There has been debate about the way the *Declaration of Principle* sets out the relationship between the authority of Christ and the authority of Scripture — 'Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh is the absolute authority […] as revealed in the Holy Scriptures'

[6] See Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (SCM, 2013), pp. 29–30.

[7] The Baptist World Alliance document that offers a covenant on intra-Baptist relationships takes this same position ('Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relationships', Baptist World Alliance, 2013 <https://baptistworld.org/intra-baptist-covenant/> [accessed 23 September 20204]).

— and whether there are tensions with other evangelical confessions of faith that suggest Scripture is the source of authority.[8] My sense is that this debate is overplayed, and those who would argue theologically that it is more appropriate to describe Christ as having supreme authority (as I would) still argue for the unique place of Scripture, and those who would prefer to express the supreme authority of Scripture will also speak of the authority of Christ.

What is more significant are issues of biblical interpretation, for those who share a belief in the normativity of Scripture recognise that it is then interpreted by fallible human beings.[9] Debates on doctrine tend to be debates around the interpretation of Scripture, and this is certainly true for contemporary debates about same-sex relationships.[10] I recognise, therefore, that when I come to Scripture I bring a whole unique collection of interpretive positions and strategies formed over decades of Bible reading. Stephen Holmes goes as far as to argue that the 'Baptist vision is actually in principle opposed to any formal account of Biblical hermeneutics, if we mean by that a definition of right and wrong ways to read the Bible'.[11] He is clear that this does not mean that anything goes, but that God's ultimate sovereignty means we cannot equate certain hermeneutical methods with truth. We work at what we might think are 'better' hermeneutical practices (although these will continue to be contested) but recognise that God, in God's freedom, may choose to speak in unexpected ways.

Finally, we must consider the question of how tradition — or, as is sometimes described, the Church's 'catholicity' — as represented in texts like the historic creeds should shape normativity. To help

[8] See discussions in James Gordon, 'Spirituality and Scripture: The Rule of the Word', in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Smyth and Helwys, 2008), pp. 103–144; Stephen R. Holmes, 'Baptists and the Bible', *Baptist Quarterly*, 43.7 (2010), pp. 410–424.

[9] See Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (SPCK, 1996), pp. 44–46.

[10] See Anthony Clarke, 'Questioning our Commitments: Exploring Hermeneutical Practice in Discussions of Human Sexuality', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*, 8 (March 2023), pp. 82–102.

[11] Holmes, 'Baptists and the Bible', p. 421.

navigate this, Wright offers the distinction between dogma, doctrine, and opinion, suggesting that dogma is those fundamentals held by the whole church that are irreversible, so must be normative, whilst doctrines are significant views held by denominations, with opinions being more individually shaped.[12] On this basis, what is normative for Baptists would then include both dogma and some doctrine: the core beliefs of the universal church together with particular doctrines such as believer's baptism.

Wright offers the Nicene creed as the one example of dogma, arguing that the 'creeds reflect not human whims or sectional self-interest but the well-winnowed, tried and tested tradition of the whole church of Jesus Christ'.[13] But Wright is doing more than simply describing the past here, offering instead a significant, perhaps faith-based, judgement. The historical reality is that the forming of the creeds from Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon were deeply political and contested moments which did not resolve the disputes of the day. To claim, as Wright does, that they do not reflect human whims seems to be making claims for these texts beyond what is historically verifiable, suggesting a strong belief in divine agency through these processes. Again, I am not questioning the particular theology contained in these documents, nor ruling out divine involvement, but I want to recognise the complexity involved, as the events surrounding these councils were deeply human and flawed. Even the exact wording of the Nicene Creed is contested, with the version used in the Western churches adding the phrase 'and from the Son' in the clause about the Holy Spirit. While Wright's division between dogma, doctrine, and opinion may appear attractive, it systematises a reality that is much more complicated, for the boundaries between the categories are disputed and so unclear.

Baptists have tended to have a mixed relationship with 'tradition', with the concern that it does not undermine the centrality and normativity of Scripture. But more recently, a number of Baptist theologians have argued for a more positive engagement with tradition

[12] Wright, *Free Church*, p. 220.
[13] Wright, *Free Church*, p. 221.

and the wider catholic teaching of the church.[14] Holmes, for example, offers a clear and compelling account of our historical rootedness, making tradition inherently good and something that all Christians should consider carefully. But the place of tradition in discerning what is normative is complex. In writing confessions, seventeenth-century Particular Baptists were both placing themselves within the theological tradition of Calvinism, while also insisting on the re-found practice of believer's baptism against the wider tradition. Others today might hold on to their commitment to believer's baptism but question some of this Calvinist theology.

In search for normativity, then, I believe that such objective orthodoxy exists, but my own knowledge of this orthodoxy will be provisional and limited. This should not deter me from pursuing such truth but will shape the way that I seek to express it. I will pursue this orthodoxy based on Scripture, recognising that I will have developed my own hermeneutical approach to the Bible, listening to and learning from the catholic tradition while recognising that the tradition itself can only be flawed and itself provisional. Furthermore, it is necessary for communities of Christian faith, whether local churches or wider groupings, to offer shared confessions that enable these communities to understand themselves and communicate with each other. These will be equally provisional, because the knowledge of the community is limited and has a significant element of subjectivity.

A Foundation for Baptist Normativity

For the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB), the *Declaration of Principle* is embedded in its constitution and is a document with which all members and accredited ministers are required to agree. In more recent years, its use has become commonplace in ordination services, a

[14] See, for example, Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Paternoster, 2002); John E. Colwell, 'Catholicity and Confessionalism: Responding to George Beasley Murray on Unity and Distinctiveness', *Baptist Quarterly*, 43.1 (January, 2009), pp. 4–23; Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Baylor University Press, 2014); Steven Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and Baptist Vision* (Wipf and Stock, 2006).

practice that further confirms its normativity.[15] The *Declaration of Principle*, in something like its present form, has been the key document since 1904.[16] We will return to the *Declaration of Principle* in due course, but if instead we were to try to explore what normativity for Baptists might look like from first principles, where might we begin?

Perhaps the key starting point for Baptists through their history has not been ecclesiology or even the Bible but an understanding of Christ and his relationship to us; that is, the early baptismal and credal formula taken from the New Testament that 'Jesus is Lord'.[17] This is seen most clearly in the political implications of the early dissenting tradition which insisted that with Christ as King there could be no other human king or authority that usurped his place. Thomas Helwys was adamant that the English king could not be judge of the human conscience.[18] More recently, the statement produced by the Baptist World Alliance to mark its centenary begins by declaring that those assembled in 2005 'renew our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ'.[19] Holmes suggests that the 'primary doctrine of the church among Baptists is a stress on the Lordship of Christ […] [and] the Baptist distinctive is applying this resolutely to the local congregation'.[20] There are other phrases Baptists have drawn on from time to time which offer a restatement of this fundamental confession. 'The crown rights of the Redeemer', the origins of which lie with John Knox, has a distinctly political feel but has been appropriated in other contexts that resonate

[15] The first time that agreement with the *Declaration of Principle* is included in a liturgical service book is in Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blyth, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Canterbury Press, 2005), pp. 126–127.

[16] Changes were made in 1906, 1938, and 2009. For an introduction to and discussion of the *Declaration of Principle* see *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, ed. by Richard Kidd (Whitley, 1996).

[17] Paul seems to see this as the starting point for faith in Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:10–11.

[18] See Wright, *Free Church*, pp. 210–212.

[19] See 'Beliefs Statement', Baptist World Alliance, n.d. <https://baptistworld.org/beliefs/> [accessed 23 September 2024].

[20] Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (T&T Clark, 2012), p. 101.

deeply with Baptist history.[21] More recently the phrase 'under the rule of Christ' expresses the same point.[22]

We might notice a number of interweaving aspects to this idea that Baptists have emphasised. 'Jesus is Lord' is first and foremost a christological statement. It is Jesus who is declared to be Lord. The original context certainly adds an important political context to such a confession — it is not Caesar who is Lord — but first and foremost it expresses the Christian believer's understanding of something of the nature of Christ. It of course does not have the depth or nuance that it contained in later creeds, but it is a christological statement that connects Christ with God and expresses faith in him. To declare Jesus as Lord is a statement of allegiance, and an attempt to ensure God remains sovereign in all things.

Second, there is also a soteriological aspect, stressing that salvation is the work of Christ as Lord and not human achievement. Holmes summarises an historical Baptist understanding when he suggests that 'God deals directly with each particular human being, summoning him or her to respond in repentance and faith to the gospel call, and to take his or her place within the active community of the redeemed'.[23] Henry Wheeler Robinson connects this confession directly to believer's baptism, which he suggests is 'an acted parable' that testifies to the soteriological aspect of the confession Jesus is Lord 'more impressively than by any verbal recital of a creed' and as 'the historical basis of *every* Christian creed'.[24]

There is then an ecclesiological aspect, because it is this same commitment to the rule of Christ as Lord that is expressed more fully in the doctrine of the local church. While being an individual confession in baptism, it is also the gathered church that confesses Christ as Lord.

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[21] See Patricia M. Took, 'Crown Rights of the Redeemer', in *Challenge to Change: Dialogues with a Radical Baptist Theologian*, ed. by Pieter J. Lalleman (Spurgeon's College, 2009), pp. 191–204; Kidd, *Something to Declare*, p. 28; Brian Haymes, *A Question of Identity: Reflections on Baptist Principle and Practice* (Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1986), p. 22; Wright, *Free Church Free State*, p. 211; Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 119.

[22] See *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Smyth and Helwys, 2008).

[23] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 95.

[24] Henry Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (Carey Kingsgate, 1946), pp. 77, 80.

Not only is the local church under the rule of Christ in that it is made up of individuals who are committed to his lordship, but, as Holmes rightly points out, these same 'individualistic' tendencies in soteriology work out in ecclesiology.[25] The local, might one even say individual, church is the locus of the ongoing gracious work of God.

We might then add what might best be described as an ethical aspect, for the lordship of Christ is worked out in the discipleship of the individual and the local congregation, as each seeks to follow Christ in the world. Here we begin to see both an interplay and tension. The local congregation is *the* community of disciples in which the life of faith is outworked, demanding some shared discipleship while still upholding the belief in the liberty of conscience where each individual must take responsibility for their own response to Christ as Lord. Such a stress on religious liberty goes back to Thomas Helwys's *The Mystery of Iniquity,* which for all its polemic tone repeatedly insists on the direct rule of Christ over human conscience.[26] Liberty of conscience may be read in contemporary post-modern culture as simply another version of self-expression, but theologically nothing could be further from the truth. As Brian Haymes points out in his discussion of Helwys, 'it was not an appeal to human rights. It is because God is as God is in Jesus that he believed that we human beings have freedom of conscience in such matters.'[27] The freedom of the individual or the local church is only the freedom to follow Christ as Lord.

Being under the rule of Christ finally has a hermeneutical aspect. While the Bible has always had a particularly significant place in Baptist life, there has been no agreed hermeneutical approach to reading the text. Baptists have firmly rejected any magisterium that might have an authoritative role in prescribing Biblical interpretation because this would transgress on the lordship of Christ. So, while Holmes may be right that there is not any agreed hermeneutical practice, what has shaped the Baptist reading of Scripture is the conviction that Jesus is

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25 Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, ch. 5, especially p. 101.

26 Thomas Helwys, *A Short History of The Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. by Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 1998), p. 37.

27 Brian Haymes, 'Thomas Helwys' *The Mystery of Iniquity*: Is it Still Relevant in the Twenty-First Century?', in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood (Regent's Park College, 2010), pp. 61–76 (p. 74).

Lord and that the rule of Christ comes through Scripture to the congregation and individual. Churches may then make further confessional statements which seek to offer a shared interpretation of Scripture, which will in essence be further explications of what it means to declare Jesus as Lord.

There is, then, a strong argument to make that the Baptist Union *Declaration of Principle* is a further reflection on the fundamental idea of being under the lordship of Christ, offering more texture and depth to this foundational confession. The *Declaration of Principle* can be seen to echo those five aspects highlighted above. It rightly has a christological aspect as it speaks of the nature of God in Christ. It has a soteriological aspect, referencing Christ as Saviour and stressing the need for repentance, faith, and baptism. It has a clear and well recognised ecclesiological aspect, expressed in the liberty of the local church. There is an ethical element, the call to discipleship and to engage in God's mission in the world. Finally, there is a hermeneutical aspect, not only stressing the significance of Scripture that reveals Christ but pointing to the way Scripture might be interpreted, by the community, with the aid of the Spirit, with a christological centre.

Living with Jesus as Lord

Building on this, let me offer three interweaving assertions of the way this confession of Jesus as Lord shapes Baptist life, assertions that stand together rather than independently, and where certainly the first two statements should be seen as equally important rather than in order of priority.

(1) The first assertion is that 'Jesus is Lord' is a personal confession of faith which must shape my life. This is a declaration of the sovereignty of God in Christ and an active commitment to discipleship, learning, and growth. But I am only able to confess Jesus is Lord because of the witness and presence of the church; thus, there is from the very beginning an interweaving of the individual and the community. Baptism is an expression of this interweaving: baptised by the church into the church on personal confession of faith in Jesus as Lord. This is not a binary choice — as if the priority of the individual or

community has to be decided — but, as Derek Hatch suggests, 'there is an intrinsic dynamism that allows the individual and the social to coinhere so that where one is found, so is the other'.[28]

A proper stress on the individual can, of course, become an excessive individualism. The most robust expression of the place of the individual in Baptist life probably comes from E. Y. Mullins, the former president of the Baptist World Alliance, who introduced into the American context the language of soul-competency.[29] For Mullins, this was clearly and carefully delineated as a competency under the rule of Christ rather than a human ability, but still places most stress on the individual in contrast to the community. While still influential, there have also been significant critiques. Back in 1926, Wheeler Robinson has Mullins in his sight when he suggests that Baptists have erred on being too individualistic at the expense of the community.[30] More recently, a number of authors have wanted to rebalance Baptist thinking by offering more stress on the catholicity of the church.[31] Jeff Jacobson is surely right when he suggests that 'unbridled liberty can undermine catholicity'.[32] Alongside this critique of an excessive individualism is the concern that such individual faith has also been expressed in overly cognitive and rational terms, so that the individual believer who confesses faith in baptism should do so through an intellectual articulation of Christian faith. The hospitality of the church to those with, for example, learning difficulties has also challenged this over-rationalistic approach.

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[28] Derek Hatch, *Thinking with the Church: Toward a Renewal of Baptist Theology* (Cascade, 2018), p. 127. A paper to BUGB Council in November 2009 from the Faith and Unity Executive, *Knowing What We Believe* — so an example of representative theology — describes this as a tension between the individual and corporate. Available at 'Who We Are', Baptists Together https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366067/Knowing_What_We.aspx. [accessed 23 September 2024].

[29] E. Y. Mullins, *The Axions of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (American Baptist Publications Society, 1908).

[30] Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, p. 143.

[31] Hatch, *Thinking with the Church,* offers a sustained exploration and critique of Mullins.

[32] 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 (Regent's Park College, 2022), p. 268.

But if the faith of a church is articulated as an individual confession that 'Jesus is Lord', then it leads to *some kind* of commitment to freedom of conscience. The catholicity of the church is vital, and excessive individualism is to be challenged with a covenant commitment to walk together in covenant. This, as Jacobson suggests, will involve a certain curtailing of individual freedom for the sake of unity.[33] I stand with those who insist that we must develop and celebrate a greater catholicity and learn from tradition, what C. K. Chesterton famously called 'the democracy of the dead'.[34] But suppose that I have a dispute with the local church of which I am a member? When does submission to the collective view move from an appropriate curtailing of individual freedom to the community standing in the place of Christ as Lord?

Suppose a female member of a church in reading Scripture both collectively and individually senses a call from God to ministry but is in a local church context that has a strong commitment to leadership as male, even articulating this on the basis of a trinitarian doctrine based on 1 Corinthians 11.[35] Does this woman accept the position of the local church, stay and challenge it, or lovingly leave? While this local church is doing what it should do in developing practical theology, it is also a particular use, and perhaps abuse, of power. For me, this goes significantly beyond the curtailing of individual freedom for the sake of unity, and the logic expressed by Holmes and Patricia Took that freedom of conscience to follow Jesus as Lord should in the very end prevail, seems compelling.[36] While my commitment is to the local church and a catholic understanding of faith, my final allegiance is to Jesus as Lord, and if my reading of Scripture with others and my confession of 'Jesus is Lord' leads me to certain theological conclusions, then ultimately, with care and love, I have a duty to follow where I believe Jesus is leading with a clear conscience, even where this opposes the local church. This is not the freedom to do as I please as an

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[33] Jacobson, 'An Exploration', p. 268.
[34] C. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (Doubleday, 1990), p. 48, cited by Hatch, *Thinking with the Church*, p. 98.
[35] This is a real scenario in an English context. In other parts of Europe, the ordained ministry of women is not a possibility, adding further complexity.
[36] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, pp. 119–120; Took, 'Crown Rights of the Redeemer', pp. 194–196.

individual, but a freedom, through Scripture and the Spirit, to understand and respond to the demands of Jesus as Lord.

(2) The second assertion, which we have already begun to discuss, is that 'Jesus is Lord' is equally the confession of the local church. Baptists have traditionally understood the local church to be an instance of the universal church and under the direct rule of Christ, not mediated by other ecclesiastical structures.[37] The local church, then, has the responsibility to discern the mind of Christ together, intentionally and collectively. The local church does this first with an intentional attention to the tradition of the church. Wright stresses that the competence of the local church is not an omnicompetence, and for its fullness of life the local church needs to engage in cooperative fellowship,[38] what has traditionally been described as 'walking together' in covenant relationship.[39] More than that, there is a broader tradition, namely the catholicity of the church, whether that be expressed in terms of an historic creed or more general developments of doctrine, that warrants our attention. It would be arrogant of the local church to think that all those who have sought to read Scripture in previous centuries had nothing to say to how Scripture is best read now.

This remains something of a tension here in the work of Wright — perhaps a tension that is inevitable — for he suggests both that no other church or group of churches has power to impose on the local church *and* that there are also some things which are too far reaching to be left to the local church and require the 'consensus of the faithful'; so some ecumenical decisions seem binding on the local church.[40] This is reminiscent of Wright's discussion of dogma and doctrine. Philip Fellows offers a very clear account of Wright's overall thinking on this issue and concludes, in line with Wright, that 'the history of Christian exegesis and doctrinal formulation on this point is vitally relevant and demands to be listened to with respect and a presumption of obedience

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37 Wright, *Free Church*, p. 52.
38 Wright, *Free Church*, pp. 183–184.
39 See Larry J. Kreitzer and Deborah Rooke, 'Walking in Covenant: The Scriptural Basis for an Early Baptist Principle', in *For the Sake of the Church: Essays in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. by Anthony Clarke (Regent's Park College, 2014), pp. 15–43.
40 Wright, *Free Church*, pp. 186–187, 192.

when a consensus can be discerned'.[41] Fellows suggests developing Wright's ideas with a clearer pneumatology, but this still does not resolve the tension. There are challenges here both in agreeing what is 'the consensus of the faithful', which will inevitably mean codification in a text, and then how these particular texts are subsequently interpreted.

The Baptist way of understanding 'Jesus as Lord' means that it is imperative for the local church to recognise the presence of Christ in others — catholicity — and to take these views with the utmost seriousness. But ultimately, for Baptists, the tension in Wright's argument has to be resolved in favour of the local church. It is the local church that listens carefully to the catholic tradition but has the ultimate responsibility to discern the mind of Christ as witnessed to in Scripture — to live with Jesus as Lord — because there is no other ecclesial body with authority to do so. Jacobson suggests it was a 'desire for freedom, amongst other reasons, which made Baptists reluctant to demand acceptance of creeds and confessions of faith'.[42] But this does not say enough, suggesting the motivation was simply a desire for freedom. It is not a desire for freedom itself but the conviction that this is a consequence of the confession 'Jesus is Lord' ruling directly in the local church. The only ecclesiological alternative would seem to be some kind of central magisterium that imposes theology and practice on the community or the individual. Inherent, then, in this ecclesiology is the possibility that a local church in studying Scripture guided by the Spirit may come to a conclusion which others consider at odds with the 'consensus of the faithful'. It does this responsibly and carefully but under the lordship of Christ. When early Baptists stated that baptism was only for believers, this was a radical step that was at odds with the 'consensus of the faithful' at the time but was born out of commitment that this was necessary to follow Christ as Lord.

The local church discerns the mind of Christ, secondly, with what might be described as a 'generous orthodoxy',[43] or a 'modesty allied

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[41] Philip Fellows, 'The Authority of Tradition in the Work of Nigel G. Wright', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*, 10 (2023), pp. 26–47 (p. 47).

[42] Jacobson, 'An Exploration', p. 268.

[43] This phrase is often attributed first to Hans Frei and as being popularised by Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2006). It has been picked up in a number of recent publications such as *The Bond of Peace: Exploring Generous Orthodoxy*, ed. by Graham Tomlin and

to firm conviction'.[44] This seems better language than tolerance. Tolerance still has too strong a sense of a commitment to a particular stance that borders on arrogance — I might tolerate others even though I 'know' they are wrong — and comes from a too realist epistemology. Generosity, on the other hand, is an attitude of heart that is based on humility and includes some recognition of the inevitable provisionality of my own position. This is why taking a critical realist position matters, as it allows me both to state clearly what I see but at the same time to recognise that my view is only ever partial. It is absolutely right and proper that the local church express theological commitments — this is part of confessing Jesus as Lord — and that it does so on a range of issues; this is not to suggest that the church shy away from such theological discussions and commitments, but to plead that it does so with generosity.[45]

The local church discerns the mind of Christ, thirdly, by recognising the liberty of conscience of the individual. Following from Mullins's language, there has been an ongoing discussion about 'soul competency' and 'congregational competency'.[46] But this again can never be a binary choice; rather it remains a constant source of creative tension, as it is the same individuals who have responsibility to live under the lordship of Christ who discern the mind of Christ together. John Colwell, for example, may point out that the *Declaration of Principle* stresses the liberty of the local church not the 'individual Christian in solipsistic isolation',[47] but ultimately the basis for the corporate walking together in Baptist life has been the freedom of conscience of the individual, living under the lordship of Christ, guided by Scripture and the Spirit. The local church cannot impose on its members theological convictions or practices. These can be corporately agreed but never

Nathan Eddy (SPCK, 2021); *Generous Orthodoxies: Essays on the History and Future of Ecumenical Theology*, ed. by Paul Silas Peterson (Pickwick, 2020).

[44] Nigel Wright, 'The Baptist Way of Being the Church', in *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*, ed. by David Slater (Mainstream, 1987), p. 44.

[45] Two small book express this generosity. Brian Haymes, *A Question of Identity,* and *A Perspective on Baptist Identity* ed. by David Slater take different positions, with the latter expressly responding to and at times critiquing Haymes.

[46] See John Hammett, 'From Church Competence to Soul Competence: The Devolution of Baptist Ecclesiology', *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*, 3.1 (Spring 2005), pp. 145–163.

[47] Colwell, 'Catholicity and Confessionalism', p. 16.

imposed, because the individuals must also confess 'Jesus is Lord'. Sometimes this may result in a changing of minds and new learning together; sometimes this may result in disagreement that is held as the community walks together in Christ. Sometimes, and with extreme sadness, the discernment of the individual may be at odds with the discernment of the community so that even within a generous orthodoxy some may feel the need to walk in a different way.

The current debate around same-sex relationships is such an example. There will be those local churches who, discerning the mind of Christ, will take a position that advocates strongly for a traditional understanding of marriage and as a result sees a more restricted place in the community for those in committed same-sex relationships. They may express this with a generous orthodoxy, which offers the warmest welcome they can, but still develop a practice that excludes those in same-sex relationships from membership of the church. Some who take a different view may feel able to walk together within this corporate discernment by the church; others may feel as a point of conscience that their confession of Jesus as Lord means they must walk a different way. The same, of course, is true of the strongly affirming church who commit themselves to the full inclusion of those in same-sex relationships while also extending the same generous orthodoxy to those who disagree with this position. Again, some may find that they can walk together and disagree, others may find that they too must walk a different way.

We must not be too quick when there is some parting of the ways to label churches as intolerant and individuals as schismatic. We should deeply regret the manifold splits in the church that have occurred and confess that this is rooted in our own human fallenness; and a further aspect of that fallenness will be the speed and clamour with which we defend our view as 'right' and another as 'wrong'. But this is also an unavoidable outworking of our confession that 'Jesus is Lord'. The only alternative would be this central magisterium that imposes theology and practice on the community or the individual. When a community compels an individual to act against their conscience (that is, their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus as Lord based on Scripture under the guidance of the Spirit) the result is a kind of

blasphemy, because it is no longer Christ who is Lord as others have usurped his place. This may well be done because of what the community understands to be right theology, based on its reading of Scripture under the guidance of the Spirit, but it is the *compelling* of others who have come to different conclusions from Scripture that is a kind of blasphemy. Alternatively, when an individual genuinely believes one thing about following Jesus as Lord but does something different, there is hypocrisy. Both blasphemy and hypocrisy have to be avoided. We should repent of our brokenness as a church and work hard so that the prayer of Jesus for unity might be more fulfilled; we should be continually self-reflective about our own motives and attitudes and the times we have sought to 'lord it over' others; but we must also encourage all to take their rightful responsibility under the lordship of Christ to whom we submit as individuals and churches.

(3) 'Jesus is Lord' is then also the confession of a Baptist Union, as the gathering together of local churches. Generally, Baptists have only recognised local churches as 'ecclesial bodies' and so resist talking about the 'Baptist Church'. But there is still the challenge and responsibility of those local churches who gather together in Associations and Unions (or other language that may be used to refer to the formal structure that gathers local churches together) to live under the lordship of Christ, discerning the mind of Christ for the shared life of the churches. As such, a Union should, then, make theological statements about its shared life (as well as soteriological, ecclesial, ethical, and hermeneutical statements) because it has already done so in declaring Jesus as Lord, and so further theological statements are an explication of this confession. But, like a local church, a Union does so with care and caution, paying attention to the tradition and expressing these with a generous orthodoxy, recognising that to confess Jesus is Lord *requires* liberty for individuals and local churches in order that they too might live under the rule of Christ.

There must, therefore, be the same insistence, as is the case in a local church, that a Union cannot impose a collective view on an individual church (and ultimately on an individual) who must be responsible and free to act in conscience under the lordship of Christ; local churches and individuals who may disagree can decide in

conscience whether to walk together or not.[48] There is a right balance between freedom (of the local church) and faithfulness (to the catholic tradition) but ultimately in Baptist ecclesiology it can only be the local church that can finally, listening to all others, determine faithfulness. Separation is again to be deeply regretted, but the possibility of separation through discerning the mind of Christ differently remains a consequence of *this* understanding of the lordship of Christ. A number of particular issues then follow. If a Baptist Union should make confessional statements which explain further what it means for this group of churches to have a shared confession of Jesus as Lord, what should be the boundaries of these statements, how should those boundaries be applied and to whom? For example, whilst the Ministries Team in the BUGB fully endorses the ministry of women and men, this has not been a 'boundary issue' in the Union, and there can be churches that for theological reasons do not do so. The Union does not impose on local churches a view of ministry because there is liberty for the local church to discern the mind of Christ, even though this is deeply painful for many of the women involved.[49]

Returning to the *Declaration of Principle*

In the light of this, we might then return to the *Declaration of Principle* as the one current normative document in the BUGB and comment on four issues that have been highlighted in recent discussions: the document's ambiguity, its theological nature, its sufficiency, and its purpose.

Jeff Jacobson has pointed to its inherent *ambiguity,* derived both from its contextual nature and possible hermeneutical interpretations; should we approach it seeking the authorial intent of the original document, with all the complexities that this involves for an historic multi-authored text, or see it as a 'living document'?[50] It is, of course,

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[48] See Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 96: 'At most the local congregation might be excluded from the denomination.'

[49] The results of Project Violet are crucial in this respect and require the most serious attention. 'Project Violet', Baptists Together, n.d. <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/363245/Project_Violet.aspx.> [accessed 23 September 2024].

[50] Jacobson, 'An Exploration', p. 254.

not a straight forward binary position, as any interpretation requires both some consideration of how well we know the original intent, or perhaps intents, as well as appropriate boundaries for a living text still speaking with some faithfulness to the past. Although Jacobson helpfully points out how some aspects could be clarified, there is also a sense that some ambiguity is inevitable. This is simply the nature of language, certainly from a critical realist position. We should recognise ambiguity and the challenges it brings, and where possible seek clarity. I certainly do not suggest we use ambiguity as a cover for disagreement or to avoid the hard work of talking together, but nor should we fear ambiguity, for it will always be with us. Whatever the original intention of the authors, a text cannot avoid becoming a 'living document' to some degree. Later generations may not understand the document in the same way and will interpret it in the light of their own understanding. Some may find it easier to live with ambiguity than others, but removing all ambiguity will be impossible in a theological text.

But if the Baptist Union has a normative document which cannot avoid some kind of ambiguity, then is there any normative interpretation of such a document for the wider Baptist Union? An interesting case is the resolution passed at the 1972 Baptist Assembly held in London in the light of the controversy caused by Michael Taylor's address the year before, which was critiqued by many others because of the way it was perceived to reject the full divinity of Christ. A resolution put to the 1972 Assembly, which was overwhelmingly supported, offered what amounted to a theological explanation of the *Declaration of Principle*, that it meant the 'full deity and real humanity' of Christ, drawing on language that echoes that of the Council of Chalcedon.[51] The more difficult question is what is the status of this resolution, for like all other resolutions of an Assembly, beyond the *Declaration of Principle*, it would only seem to have a 'representative' status not a 'normative' one, as it is not the basis for membership.

That does not mean that we should not revise the *Declaration of Principle* to make it as clear as we can, and the language of the 1972

[51] For the text and a wider discussion see Nigel Wright, 'Sustaining Evangelical Identity: Faithfulness and Freedom in Denominational Life', in *Truth that Never Dies: The Dr G. R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lectures, 2002–2012*, ed. by Nigel G. Wright (James Clarke, 2015), p. 209.

resolution, for example, could be included in a new normative text. But any text, through ambiguity and a variety of interpretation, has its limits. Or, more positively, a text may create space in which a variety of people can stand, recognising that texts are not the only, or even central, carriers of doctrine. As Mike Higton suggests, 'Doctrine lives in the thoughts, words and actions of the whole church, and then also, and secondarily, in formal statements and authoritative pronouncements.'[52]

It has been recently robustly pointed out by various authors that the *Declaration of Principle* is a *theological* document;[53] it can be no other as a reflection on the lordship of Christ! It may not be a creed in the traditional sense of what that means, but it is certainly and necessarily confessional. There have also been calls over the years for the *Declaration of Principle* to be reworked or replaced.[54] In principle, these calls are entirely proper, and any suggestion that British Baptists are non-credal and do not need a creed is significantly overstated; we may be non-credal, but we have certainly been confessional. Nor is the *Declaration of Principle* sacrosanct, as it is a contingent document that has been changed over time, and there is an argument for intentionally treating the *Declaration of Principle* as such and subject to review from time to time.

The issue is not whether there should be a theologically articulated basis for the Union — we have one already in the *Declaration of Principle*. But the recent debate about same-sex relationships has raised questions again about whether the *Declaration of Principle* is still *sufficient* for the needs of the Union and whether it says enough.[55] There are various aspects of doctrine that are not touched on at all and others, even the deity of Christ and the Trinity, that are touched on only briefly.

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[52] Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 12.

[53] Andrew Goodliff, 'English Baptists Confessing the Faith in the Twentieth Century: A Response to Christopher Crocker', *Baptist Quarterly* (2024), doi:10.1080/0005576X.2024.2331340.

[54] See Brian Haymes, *A Question of Identity*, pp. 28–30; George Beasley-Murray, 'Confessing Baptist Identity', in *A Perspective on Baptist Identity* ed. by David Slater (Mainstream, 1987), pp. 75–86; and Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Paternoster, 2003), pp. 45–47.

[55] See, for example, Stephen Finamore, 'The Declaration of Principle and Biblical Interpretation with Notes on Same Sex Marriage', Evangelical Baptists, 26 June 2022 <http://www.evangelicalbaptist.uk/2022/06/26/the-declaration-of-principle-and-biblical-interpretation-with-notes-on-same-sex-marriage/> [accessed 23 September 2024].

The Union of churches could choose to develop an amended version of the *Declaration of Principle* which includes theological material on a broader range of matters, which again would be entirely proper as a normative document of the Union. But there is, of course, no simple objective list of 'issues' that such a document ought to include. The *Declaration of Principle* is necessarily subjective or contingent, in that it has picked some issues as those which Baptists sought to gather around (Jesus as Lord, baptism of believers, evangelisation, etc.) while omitting others (particular or general views on election).[56] We should be willing to have discussion around the content of a normative theological document sufficient for the contemporary context, but recognising that those discussions will be contested and subjective and that the text will have some ambiguity.

Finally, we might reflect on considerations about the *purpose* of the *Declaration of Principle*, that is, its ethical aspect. Returning to the 'Four Voices' method of theology discussed above, once different voices are identified, then there is space for a conversation between them including the recognition of where there might be dissonance between the voices. In this context, the issue is where there might be some dissonance between the *normative* voice, here expressed in the *Declaration of Principle*, and the *espoused* or *operant* voices of a local church.

For example, a local church has formed a significant relationship with a local retirement complex and some of its residents have become regular attenders at the church. Over a period of months, a number of them have been baptised, but due to their age and some physical constraints, they were all baptised as believers by effusion not immersion. This creates a tension between the recent operant practice of the local church and the normative *Declaration of Principle*, which states that 'Christian baptism is the immersion into water in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit […]'. I cannot imagine the validity of these baptisms being questioned (unless one of them wanted to become a Baptist minister), even though the normative document seems

[56] In that sense the Nicene Creed is also subjective and contingent in that it chooses to include some things and not others, shaped by its historical context.

clear. We could argue that baptism in our churches is normally carried out by immersion — it is the norm — but allows pastoral exceptions.

But we should pay close attention to the deliberate use of language here: baptism by immersion might be the 'norm', that allows for different pastoral practice from time to time, as well as the 'normative' (that is, the agreed) interpretation of Scripture and theological position. This example raises interesting and complex questions about how the whole *Declaration of Principle* is used, how some aspects of dissonance might be held, and whether some aspects of it are interpreted as more essential. If a local church were to decide that it would only baptise by sprinkling as a theological position, then this might be a more significant dissonance.[57] If a church adopted a hyper-Calvinist basis of faith that questioned whether it was the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness, is that acceptable? If a local church questioned the understanding of the divinity of Christ expressed by the Nicene Creed could it remain in the Union?

A similar issue arises when a local church adopts a statement of faith, such as that from the Evangelical Alliance, to express its theological position. Does this then commit all members to agree with all points in it (is it prescriptive?), or does it express the generally held position of the gathered community? It is interesting that when, in 2006, the European Baptist Federation introduced the beliefs statement that had been adopted by the Baptist World Alliance in 2005, it did so with real care, recognising that all its member unions have their own doctrinal statements. But this is a 'statement of Baptist Identity which can helpfully summarise the core beliefs and values which are common among European and Middle Eastern Baptists'.[58] It explicitly does not say that these elements are agreed by all members; it is descriptive of shared beliefs and not prescriptive.

This takes us back to the kind of document we imagine the *Declaration of Principle* to be. Can it be understood as a declarative statement that expresses the shared understanding of the Union of

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[57] Historically, the very first Baptists baptised by effusion. See David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Baylor, 2018), pp. 46–47.

[58] 'About', European Baptist Federation, n.d. <https://www.ebf.org/about> [accessed 23 September 2024].

Churches, Associations, and Colleges, or is it necessarily a prescriptive document that imposes boundaries? The 1972 Assembly resolution was passed by well over ninety percent, which gives some clear indication of a common faith. But it is interesting that the same Assembly also rejected an amendment calling for the discipline of those who were thought to have denied the divinity of Christ.[59] There was not the desire for it to be strongly prescriptive. This would match Fiddes' suggestion that confessions, or perhaps in this case a statement with confessional content, 'should be regarded as the *context* for covenant-making but never be the *required* basis for "walking together"'.[60]

The process whereby such a significant normative document is amended will be difficult in any time and context, and the current version will inevitably be shaped by some degree of historical contingency. But if a normative document is to be shaped by Baptist practice which has understood the confession 'Jesus is Lord' to imply freedom of conscience for the individual and liberty for the local church under the lordship of Christ, then it must be developed on the basis of a generous orthodoxy. The *purpose* of any normative document cannot be to impose beliefs on others, as this betrays our convictions about freedom of conscience and belief, but rather it must be to express a common faith.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that to declare that 'Jesus is Lord' is and should be the foundational normative statement for Baptists. It is because we believe Jesus is Lord that we read Scripture, or, as American Baptist James McClendon puts it, 'the Bible is Scripture for us because Jesus Christ makes it so'.[61] But equally, the Jesus we believe in is not anyone's Jesus: 'He is the Jesus revealed in the pages of Scripture.'[62] It is because we believe Jesus is Lord that we respond with repentance and faith, and it is because of the way they have understood this confession

[59] Wright, 'Sustaining Evangelical Identity', p. 216.
[60] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 47. See also Goodliff, 'English Baptists Confessing the Faith in the Twentieth Century', pp. 1–13.
[61] James McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Vol. 2* (Abingdon, 1994), p. 471.
[62] Kidd, *Something to Declare*, p. 29.

that Baptists have insisted that a direct consequence is the freedom of conscience of the individual and the liberty of the local church to follow Jesus as Lord; in other words, to deny freedom of conscience and the liberty of the local church is to usurp the lordship of Christ.

I have then suggested that understood in this way, the confession 'Jesus is Lord' has a number of implications. It is right and necessary for the individual, the local church, and a union of churches to make further theological statements that fill out this statement; the *Declaration of Principle* of the BUGB is one such document. Such statements, from individuals, local churches, and unions of churches, will have a confessional nature, whether or not they are deemed to be creeds, having been formulated on the basis of Scripture and after careful listening to the wider tradition of the church. But because our knowledge of the truth is partial, these statements will be offered with a generous orthodoxy that recognises the provisionality inherent in our own understanding.

In all this, there will be a complex interplay between the individual and the community. There is a vital role for the church community in handing down the tradition and passing on faith, so an understanding of catholicity is necessary. But within the community, the individual has responsibility to follow Jesus as Lord, walking alongside others. This means that we should expect a mutual shaping between the individuals and the local church, and a humble openness to the discernment of the gathered community. But, sadly, there may be moments when an individual, taking responsibility to stand under the lordship of Christ, decides they cannot walk together on the basis of the agreed theological position of the local church; and, equally sadly, times a local church may feel it cannot walk with other churches in a union. My hope would be that there is a generosity of spirit that enables us to walk together, but fully recognise that for some, their conscience may dictate that to live under the rule of Christ is to walk a different path. Our response can only be a deep sadness and sense of repentance that the body of Christ is still broken and a renewal of our commitment to reach out to each other in Christ.