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Call for Papers

Special Issue Autumn 2026: *Baptistic Theologies from the Middle East: Identity, Mission, and Practice in Wartime and Post-Conflict Upheaval*

Guest edited by Dr Caleb Hutcherson (ABTS, Lebanon)

Baptists and other free church communities within the Believers' Church tradition in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) live and minister within multireligious societies shaped by long histories of coexistence, as well as political upheaval and recurrent violence. Often small but deeply rooted, these communities bear witness to the gospel alongside Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic neighbours, forming an ecclesial horizon in which religious diversity is neither new nor exceptional. Yet their witness unfolds within a region marked by war, displacement, systemic injustice, and rapid political reconfiguration — conditions that press theological and ethical questions to the surface.

This special issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* will explore how baptistic identity, mission, and practice are shaped in Middle Eastern wartime and post-conflict contexts. Moving beyond abstract debates about 'just war' or 'pacifism', we invite attention to the lived convictions that take shape amid violence, trauma, and political upheaval. What does it mean to sustain a baptistic community (rooted in commitments to biblicism, liberty, discipleship, community, and mission) when persistence in witness and preservation of life are daily concerns? How do forgiveness and justice hold together in contexts where calls for reconciliation risk obscuring the realities of oppression? And how do communities maintain faithful witness, prophetic truth-telling, and public advocacy when facing sectarianism, nationalism, militant partisanship, or ongoing genocide?

Rather than rehearsing narratives of decline or disappearance that often dominate descriptions of Middle Eastern Christianity, this issue seeks to highlight baptistic theological creativity, courage, and

agency. The experiences of baptistic communities offer fresh insight into the meaning of identity, mission, and practice in times of crisis. By bringing these voices from the MENA region into conversation with wider European and global Baptist scholarship, *JEBS* aims to broaden understanding of what faithful witness looks like in a region again marked by war and violent conflict.

Potential points of focus include:

- Historical and identify-formation studies of baptistic and free church communities in the MENA region, especially in relation to experiences of war, displacement, or political upheaval.
- Theological responses to conflict, including approaches to justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and truth-telling amid and after violence or occupation.
- Baptistic identity shaped by minority status, sectarian environments, or experiences of marginalization.
- Baptistic ethics and public theology in settings marked by nationalism, systemic injustice, or militantly partisan public spaces.
- Convictional praxis regarding preservation and persistence, including community formation, pastoral care, and everyday faith amid crisis.
- Women's voices and ministries within wartime or post-conflict baptistic communities.
- Worship, embodied practices, and communal life that express hope, resistance, or prophetic presence in times of upheaval.

Peer review

All articles are subject to blind peer review process.

Submissions

We are warmly inviting submissions for this special issue. Please send an abstract (200–300 words that provide a broad summary of the intended article) by email to jebs@ibts.eu by **15 March 2026** or sooner. The editors will then assess the suitability of the topic for *JEBS* by 31 March 2026. Full article submissions that are invited for peer-review should follow *JEBS* formatting guidelines (MHRA style) and be no longer than 7500 words (including footnotes). Full article submissions will be collected until **31 August 2026.**

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Questions

Any further questions about this special issue can be addressed to *JEBS* guest editor:

Caleb Hutcherson
chutcherson@abtslebanon.org

Editorial

Toivo Pilli

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This issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* brings together articles from different areas of research, demonstrating well that baptistic scholars are engaged in a wide variety of topics. Showing the rich spectrum of research is one of the reasons why *JEBS* seeks to present a range of volumes that encompass regional foci, such as previous volumes that represented Scottish or Dutch scholarly work, topical volumes, such as the one that focused on Baptist-Anabaptist theological relations, along with those such as the present issue, that fit under the general concept of *varia*.

Nevertheless, the articles in this volume are intertwined with a couple of topical threads. For example, the first two articles engage with themes of religious freedom and anti-racist practices — in short, with social-political questions. Job van Lobenstein uses Pakistan as a case study and example for exploring the understanding of freedom of religion or belief. The article argues that freedom of religion — or at least religious toleration — is not exclusively a Western concept. The author describes the complex situation when tensions arise between secular constitutional positions and religious legislation, but reminds the reader that discussing religious freedom in postcolonial countries requires taking into account the local historical and cultural contexts. The call for careful dialogue is likewise explicitly made by Paul Weller in touching upon another socio-political and religious issue — that of addressing the Far Right. Weller finds grounds in Baptist tradition and support from his own personal experience for opposing Far-Right ideologies and respective organisations, but at the same time keeping a

conversation open with individuals. The article is a response to a collection entitled *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, edited by Helen Paynter and Maria Power (published 2024).

In addition to social and political themes within a theological framework, four articles look at ecclesiological realities from different angles, ranging from mission to New Testament leadership patterns. Fran Porter's article argues why the voices of female theologians should be paid careful attention in the church and what the implications of their theological work are 'for all theological endeavours'. The author discusses how the notion of 'tainted legacy' is 'refracted through gender power relations to apply differently to women than to men and how this hinders reception of women's theological contributions'. The article is written against the backdrop of the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder's legacy of sexual assault perpetrated against women, and the text gives reasons why the theology women produce plays an important role specifically for the integrity of Anabaptist theology.

Graham Meiklejohn invites the reader to reconsider success criteria in missions. In fact, the author proposes to abandon success criteria altogether, and to talk about missions as a practice of faithful witness. Faithful witness, the text demonstrates, is not a passive attitude, but includes both prophetic vision and persistence as well as eschatological perspective. However, it has a liberating effect, as by 'acting as faithful witnesses, leaders and practitioners are released from the responsibility of outcomes and results'. In addition, the concept of *missio Dei* is a reminder that God's sovereign grace is active in faithful missional practice. Rosa Hunt and Edward Kaneen add another facet to the conversation in the field of ecclesiology. They also invite readers to find a fresh interpretative angle, asking to reimagine church membership in contemporary Wales. They, too, are dealing with a topic that is not only theoretical, but tightly connected with practical aspects of Baptist churches. Instead of seeing church membership as commitment to the organisation — as arguably is increasingly the case in Wales — Hunt and Kaneen encourage Baptist believers to commit to fellow believers

as a community on a journey and to Christ as the source of salvation. The article helpfully uses the image of pilgrimage (well known to non-conformist believers through the centuries) as a focal point of the discussion.

Andrew Williams and Sean Ray explore ministry and leadership concepts in the New Testament. As Baptists have always been keen to build their convictions on a biblical basis, this article brings inspiring and important aspects into the realm of Baptist or baptistic ecclesiology and practice. Analysing the roles of elders and bishops in the Scriptures, the authors demonstrate that a sharp distinction between these leadership positions was unlikely in the first-century Christian communities. Williams and Ray argue that early Christian church governance did not lean towards mono-episcopacy, which is a later development, but rather towards plural leadership 'with multiple individuals leading simultaneously'.

The final article in this issue, written by Lee Spitzer, is an assessment of the significance of the 23rd Baptist World Congress that took place in Brisbane, Australia, from 7 to 12 July, 2025. The article explores the Congress's key topics, and evaluates the projects and initiatives that the major Baptist gathering highlighted and confirmed, including a call for 'collaborative global mission'. Spitzer, an expert in Baptist World Alliance history, 'considers the significance of the event in light of the 120-year-old journey of the BWA'. Even if, from a historical point of view, it is too early to say anything definitive about the impact of the congress, some initial suggestions are offered by Spitzer, with awareness that this analytical overview may serve as a good point of comparison in the future.

The present issue of *JEBS*, publishing research from different areas of baptistic theology, tells symbolically the story of Baptist diversity. Let me draw your attention to the editorial plan to publish a similar *varia*-volume in Spring next year. Articles from Baptist and baptistic scholars as well as from others are welcomed for submission! Also, for the autumn issue for 2026, guest editor Dr Caleb Hutcherson will collect articles that concentrate on Middle-East theological reflection and practice. This special issue will come under the general

title 'Baptistic Theologies from the Middle East: Identity, Mission, and Practice in Wartime and Post-Conflict Upheaval'. Again, submissions for consideration are very welcome and more details can be found in the 'Call for Papers' included in this volume.

'You Do Not Have the Freedom of Religion!': A Postcolonial Analysis of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the Context of Pakistan

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Abstract
This article analyses Article 18 (Freedom of Religion or Belief, FoRB) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from a postcolonial perspective, using Pakistan as a case study. It challenges the assumption that FoRB is a Western construct, demonstrating that various cultures, including Islamic traditions, had established forms of religious tolerance long before the European Enlightenment. While Pakistan initially supported Article 18, advocating for the right to change one's religion, its legal framework has since evolved, incorporating Islamic principles that restrict religious freedom. This shift has created tensions between Pakistan's secular constitutional foundations and religious legislation, leading to increased limitations on minority rights. The study highlights the complex interplay between colonial legacies, religious identity, and human rights discourse, arguing that critiques of FoRB in postcolonial states must consider historical and cultural contexts rather than applying a purely Western framework.

Keywords
Freedom of religion; postcolonialism; Pakistan; Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

Introduction

In the 2023 annual report on Religious Freedom, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) criticised Pakistan for continuing to violate Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which describes the right to freedom of religion or

belief (FoRB). Likewise, the UK Parliament held a debate on 6 September 2023 on the topic of religious freedom in Pakistan which was also highly critical of the country for violating Article 18 of the UDHR.[1] Pakistan, which is now a predominantly Islamic country, used to be part of British India in which Muslims were a minority group. While the British Empire ruled over the region, it implemented laws based on British norms and values, which differed from those of the region, and, significantly, implemented so-called 'divide and rule' policies, which separated the country into religious groups. These policies and laws have made a considerable impact on the region, leading to the deaths of many and other consequences which can still be measured today.[2]

At first sight, this 'Western' criticism of Pakistan by the United Kingdom and the United States of America for violation of the Freedom of Religion Act within the UDHR can seem like a repetition of colonial times in which the British rulers would impose their way of thinking on British India. This, therefore, calls for a critical review of both FoRB as a right in the UDHR and of the criticism Western governments have levelled at Pakistan. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question of how the postcolonial history of Pakistan shapes its engagement with the UDHR's Article 18, and how this history challenges or supports postcolonial critiques of human rights. The article begins by investigating the current literature surrounding the topic of post-colonialism and FoRB. Then, the main theories and discourses surrounding this topic are established, which subsequently serve as a foundation for investigating how the Freedom of Religion Act within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflects or contests postcolonial studies when looking at the case study of Pakistan.

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[1] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report* (Washington DC, 2023) <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/2023-annual-report> [accessed 3 November 2025]; House of Commons, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: The Official Report* (6 September 2023, Volume 737, Ahmadi Muslims: Pakistan) (London: Hansard).

[2] Francis Robinson, 'The British Empire and Muslim Identity in South Asia', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 8 (1998), pp. 272–278; Farhat Haq, *Sharia and the State in Pakistan: Blasphemy Politics* (Routledge, 2019), p. 18; Kaushik Roy, 'Partition of British India: Causes and Consequences Revisited', *India Review*, 13.1 (2014), pp. 78–86 (pp. 79–81).

Approach and Positionality

Postcolonial studies are a broad concept, and in taking a postcolonial perspective in this article, it is important to set out here the specific aspects within postcolonial studies most pertinent to the focus of the study at hand. 'Post-colonialism' itself is a contested term. As Ania Loomba indicates in the title of her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 'post' means a time after, in both a temporal and ideological sense. However, many previous colonies still struggle with the consequences of colonial times, while additionally, some countries are today still economically and culturally dependent on their former rulers. According to Loomba, in the new world order, countries no longer directly rule their colonies, yet some countries are still culturally, economically, and politically influenced.[3]

'Influence' is an important word in the focus of postcolonial studies taken in this article. It discusses the questions of who is influencing whom, and who is imposing ideas, norms, and values on whom. In this study, I therefore do not look at postcolonial aspects of economic or military power from one country to another but at ideological forms of empire building.[4] In doing so, I draw upon the work of the famous author Edward Said, who wrote about the notion of 'Orientalism', which he described as follows:

> Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient — dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.[5]

'Western' countries try to modernise and develop the countries of the 'Orient' by replacing what they see as 'orthodox and conservative' ideas with Western culture and liberal ideas. In this article, I will examine

[3] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 28–29.
[4] Tariq Jazeel, *Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 2019), p. 5.
[5] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979), p. 3.

whether 'Western' countries attempt to exert influence on Pakistan through the Freedom of Religion Act in the UDHR.[6]

I recognise that as a Dutch, white, academic man, born in the twenty-first century, my position is privileged. I understand that I cannot even imagine what life is like to be a woman or to come from a different country. As a Christian, I can scarcely understand what it is like to be a Muslim or a Hindu. Despite this, I do believe I should try to learn as much as possible about the position of those who are different from me. Although I can never fully make sense of the world, even a limited understanding is better than none. Hence, by educating myself about the cultures, beliefs, religions, and perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds, I aim to gain a deeper understanding during each encounter. In this study, I hope that this attempt, while recognising my background, becomes clear to you as a reader. However, I acknowledge that my well-intentioned efforts, coming from a position of privilege as a Christian, white, academic man from the Netherlands, may carry the risk of being perceived as insulting, imperialistic, or perpetuating colonial attitudes.

Postcolonial Perspectives on UDHR

Many scholars have debated the legitimacy and flaws of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Some scholars, like Richard Rorty, argue that there is no fundamental basis for universal human rights at all, but that they can still be influential.[7] Other scholars, such as Valerie Finch and John McGroarty, argue that there is such a thing as fundamental human rights, but that some human rights leave room for interpretation.[8] Michael Freeman writes that there are different ways to legitimise the UDHR, but that all depends on one's perspective and

[6] J. K. Patnaik, 'Human, Rights: The Concept and Perspectives: A Third World View', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 65.4 (2004), pp. 499–514 (pp. 508–511).

[7] Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 48–50; Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, Philosophical Papers 3 (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 174–175.

[8] Valerie Finch and John McGroarty, *Human Rights Law Essentials* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 17–19.

theories. He argues that one should always be critical and examine the different theories on which human rights are based.[9] This makes engaging with or drawing upon the UDHR in academic argument highly complicated. Some scholars have taken a more critical approach to the notion of the UDHR by using postcolonial theories. Bonny Ibhawoh, for example, argues that many human rights scholars have been too fixated on the notion of breakthroughs in the process of the creation of Human Rights while failing to notice the historical events that led to the creation of the UDHR.[10] According to Ibhawoh, scholars often mention Western events like the French Revolution or the American Revolution as historical events that have led to the formation of universal human rights. However, he argues that scholars fail to consider non-Western narratives, which tend to marginalise colonial violence.[11] José-Manuel Barreto agrees with this by arguing that in ignoring non-Western narratives in human rights theories, human rights only focus on the relation between the state and the individual without taking into account the problematic relation of the colonisers and the colonies.[12]

Furthermore, different postcolonial scholars, following the concept of a postcolonial cultural relativist approach, observe that Western nations have disregarded the cultural experiences and values of the Global South by asserting the universality of human rights sets.[13] Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed comment that from non-Western perspectives, the claim for human rights to be 'universal' can be experienced as neo-colonial and as a form of Western domination and

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[9] Michael Freeman, *Human Rights* (Polity Press, 2017), p. 52.

[10] Bonny Ibhawoh, *Imperialism and Human Rights: Colonial Discourses of Rights and Liberties in African History* (State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 15–17; A. Dirk Moses, Marco Duranti, and Roland Burke, *Decolonization, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 37–39.

[11] Moses et al., *Decolonization, Self-Determination*, p. 38.

[12] José-Manuel Barreto, *Human Rights from a Third World Perspective: Critique, History, and International Law* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 142.

[13] Ashwani Peetush and Jay Drydyk, *Human Rights: India and the West* (Oxford Academic, 2015); Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 12–13; Patnaik, 'Human Rights: The Concept and Perspectives', p. 507; Reza Afshari, 'An Essay on Islamic Cultural Relativism in the Discourse of Human Rights', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 16.2 (1994), pp. 235–276 (p. 246), doi:10.2307/762447.

restructuring of the 'Orient'.[14] Moreover, according to J. K. Patnaik, the universal claim of the UDHR can feel like an infringement of the self-determination of previous colonies.[15] Conversely, some authors do claim that non-Western countries have influenced the creation of the UDHR. Huub Lems, for example, describes the positive view of Indonesia towards the UDHR. According to Lems, former foreign minister of Indonesia Ali Alatas claimed that the UDHR has helped former colonies to 'cast off the yoke of colonialism'.[16] Heena Makhija argues similarly in a case study on India, stating that India was actively involved in the process of forming human rights. By doing so, Makhija contends, India has received legitimacy for its own existence and influenced the outcome of universal human rights.[17] Lastly, Islamic history professor Reza Afshari is critical of the postcolonial cultural relativist approach, arguing that even though it is true that the idea of human rights comes from Western countries, they are applicable across the entire world. Indeed, Afshari argues that the universality of human rights is not about the 'cultural-ideological façade', but rather about the protection of individuals from a state that violates human rights. According to Afshari, it is a political demand to protect the individual against the modern state and market economies.[18]

Different Perspectives on Freedom of Religion or Beliefs

As outlined by the United Nations (UN), human rights are the entitlements that individuals or groups possess simply by their humanity.[19] These rights serve as safeguards against various forms of

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[14] Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, p. 12.

[15] Patnaik, 'Human Rights: The Concept and Perspectives', pp. 508–509.

[16] A. Van De Beek, Eduardus Van Der Borght, and Bernardus Vermeulen, *Freedom of Religion* (Brill, 2010), p. 95. Huub Lems, 'Freedom of Religion in Indonesia: Some Thoughts from an International Perspective', in *Freedom of Religion*, ed. by A. Van De Beek et al. (Brill, 2010), pp. 89–107 (p. 95).

[17] Heena Makhija, 'India and Human Rights Diplomacy at the United Nations: The Discourse on Torture', *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 26.2 (2022), pp. 208–226 (pp. 209–210).

[18] Afshari, 'An Essay on Islamic Cultural Relativism', pp. 247–249.

[19] United Nations (General Assembly), 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948) <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [accessed 18 October 2023].

injustice, such as slavery and torture. Additionally, they uphold individual liberties, including the right to express one's opinions and practise one's beliefs. Human rights have evolved into a universal language for articulating demands for justice.[20] Together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be seen as the foundation of the international system of human rights.[21] One of the articles in the UDHR is Article 18, otherwise known as the Freedom of Religion Act. Article 18 describes that

> everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.[22]

Various discussions were held on the meaning of FoRB. Is FoRB the freedom of individuals to choose their religion, or is it the freedom to practise one's religion without interference from the state? Most notable and relevant for this current study is the debate on freedom of apostasy as part of Article 18. This right has been a controversial part of the freedom of religion and has been debated since the formation of Article 18. Some Islamic authors like Saeed and Saeed recognise that Islam allows a certain freedom of religion. This means that one is free to believe in the religion that one desires and to profess this. However, the freedom to change one's religion is against Islamic laws. They therefore consider that from an Islamic perspective the freedom of religion does not entail the freedom to spread one's religion and change one's religion.[23] The notion of apostasy in the UDHR has not only been a matter of debate in Islamic countries but also in Hindu

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[20] United Nations (General Assembly), 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> [accessed 22 March 2025].

[21] Christopher N. J. Roberts, *The Contentious History of the International Bill of Human Rights*, Cambridge Studies in Law and Society (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 49–52.

[22] UN, 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'.

[23] Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam,* pp. 15–16.

countries like India.[24] Although Linde Lindkvist and David Hodge recognise that there is no straightforward answer to the notion of conversion as part of the freedom of religion, they contest the view of scholars like Saeed and Saeed by carefully arguing that freedom of religion also means the freedom of apostasy.[25] Moreover, according to Silvio Ferrari, FoRB can challenge other rights that are written in the UDHR. From a religious point of view, the UDHR, and with that FoRB, can be seen as another set of 'normative commitments'.[26] These commitments are often in line with religious beliefs, but they can also contradict each other. When religious norms and the norms written in the UDHR contradict each other, Ferrari argues, religious people often choose the authority of their religion over that of the UDHR. In these scenarios, FoRB could challenge other rights written in the UDHR; for instance, the freedom from discrimination if one's religion forbids same-sex orientation.[27]

A Brief (Colonial) History of Pakistan

To return to the particular case study, this section offers, as the heading suggests, a brief (colonial) history of Pakistan. Since the time of the first settlers on the South-Asian subcontinent, the region has been influenced by different invaders and colonisers.[28] Both the Aryans and the Arabs invaded parts of the land that is now called India. The people who used to live there before the invasions saw their culture almost completely dominated by these colonisers.[29] In their incursions, the

[24] Lourens Minnema, 'Hindu Views of Human Rights Regarding Religious Minorities, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Conscience, and Anti-Conversion Laws', *NTKR Tijdschrift Voor Recht En Religie*, 1 (2019), pp. 11–29 (pp. 20–24).

[25] David R. Hodge, 'Advocating for the Forgotten Human Right', *International Social Work*, 49.4 (2006), pp. 431–443 (pp. 437–439); Linde Lindkvist, *Religious Freedom and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 98–104.

[26] Silvio Ferrari, *Routledge Handbook of Law and Religion* (Routledge, 2015), p. 147.

[27] Ferrari, *Routledge Handbook of Law and Religion*, pp. 147–148.

[28] For this research, it is important to have a general overview of Pakistan's complex history. I recognise that such a history is highly sophisticated and that this brief section cannot aim to fully describe such vast complexity.

[29] T. K. Oommen, 'Society, Religion, and Modernity in Postcolonial India', in *Religion and Modernity in India*, ed. by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Aloka Parasher Sen (Oxford Academic, 2017), pp. 21–35 (pp. 23–24).

Arabs destroyed Hindu temples and replaced them with Mosques. However, the Arab conquerors failed to take over the whole Indian sub-continent, and, as a result, not much conversion to Islam happened, and the Arabs and the people who came from the land started to live relatively peacefully together.[30] This, however, changed during the British Raj (Rule) that started around the seventeenth century and lasted until the twentieth century.[31] During the period of the British Raj, the colonisers introduced Western ideas concerning the modernisation of technology, democracy, and nationhood. The British rulers did this largely through the English language, which was learned by the elites of the region. The early generation that was educated by the British colonisers was relatively positive about the presence of the colonisers, since they saw them as progressive.[32]

Nevertheless, the British colonisers shifted from elite politics to mass politics. By attempting to learn about the population, for example by writing reports and books about the land and its people, the British tried to control them more effectively. This, however, had a strong oriental influence, which led to a process of traditionalising the land. The climax of this oriental approach was the 'Decennia Census' of 1881, in which the British government tried to make clear distinctions between the different identity groups.[33] This led to a policy which is infamously known as 'divide and rule'. During this time, the history of India was divided by the British into a Hindu, Muslim, and British period. The government separated the Indian society into different groups depending on their religion. Practically, this meant that Muslims, for instance, had to disclose their religion when they went to the hospital or signed up for the army. Whereas before Muslims did not have to openly identify as Muslims, and Hindus as Hindus, they now had to.

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30 Ira M. Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 513–517.

31 Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century*, p. 536.

32 Ian Talbot, 'India and Pakistan', in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, ed. by Paul R. Brass (Routledge, 2010), pp. 27–41 (p. 27).

33 Talbot, 'India and Pakistan', p. 28; Minnema, 'Hindu Views of Human Rights', p. 19.

Consequently, this caused the population of India to distinguish itself more from each other by emphasising their religious background. Muslims would, for instance, change their name from a Hindu name to an Islamic name.[34] Hindus and Christians would do the same by defining and interpreting what they ought to be from their religion.[35]

As the boundaries between the different identity groups grew, the tension also increased. The Muslims, who were the biggest minority group within the country, felt this tension and started to plead to the British government for their own country. This demand to have an independent Islamic country grew when the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League failed to reach a power-sharing agreement during the culmination of negotiations for independence from British rule in 1946–1947. Eventually, the British colonial government agreed to have two separate countries, which led to the partition of India and Pakistan. This event caused mass migration between the two areas, extraordinary outbursts of violence, and the deaths of between two hundred thousand and two million people.[36] After the partition, Pakistan quickly became a predominantly Islamic country. The Quran was recognised as the source of theological truth and became the base of civil and criminal law. However, the interpretation of the Quran is often debated among religious leaders in Pakistan.[37] Moreover, the constitution of Pakistan and its laws are also highly influenced by its former colonial ruler. Indeed, English law has influenced Pakistani politics and law in such a way that an entanglement has been created between 'secular' English law and laws based on the Sharia.[38]

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[34] Robinson, 'The British Empire', pp. 272–278.

[35] Minnema, 'Hindu Views of Human Rights', p. 19; Chad M. Bauman, 'Hindu-Christian Conflict in India: Globalisation, Conversion, and the Coterminal Castes and Tribes', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 72.3 (2013), pp. 633–653, doi:10.1017/S0021911813000569.

[36] Roy, 'Partition of British India', pp. 35–37.

[37] Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.190.

[38] Haq, *Sharia and the State in Pakistan*, p. 18.

A Brief History of Freedom of Religion and Belief in the UDHR: Not Just a Western Phenomenon

As already noted, the notion of freedom of religion is often seen as a consequence of Western European modernisation.[39] However, different cultures over time have developed similar ideas on religious freedom. Indeed, in the time of the ancient Roman Empire, some emperors extended a certain degree of freedom of religion to, for example, the Jews and later the Christians.[40] But even before that, some rulers allowed certain forms of religious freedom in their domains. For instance, King Cyrus was relatively tolerant towards the people living in his land who believed in different gods.[41] Also, other traditions, cultures, and religions have implemented forms of religious tolerance. In the Islamic Sharia laws, there is a special status for *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book). *Ahl al-kitāb* often referred to non-Muslim believers who recognised a certain part of the literary tradition of Islam, such as Jews, Christians, and Sabians.[42] This legal status '*ahl ad-dimmah',* which means the protected people, is for the people who fall under the category '*ahl al-kitāb*'. Having this legal status gave these people a limited amount of religious freedom, granted that they pay the *jizya,* a tax for non-Muslims, and would recognise the supremacy of the Islamic State.[43] This legal, *ad-dimmah* system for *ahl al-kitāb* was implemented in different countries as early as

[39] W. Cole Durham Jr, Javier Martínez-Torrón, and Donlu D. Thayer, *Law, Religion, and Freedom: Conceptualizing a Common Right* (Routledge, 2021), p. 37.

[40] J. Derek Holmes and Bernard Bickers, *Short History of the Catholic Church* (A&C Black, 2002), pp. 11–12, 31–32.

[41] Richard A. Taylor, *Haggai, Malachi: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (B&H Publishing, 2004), pp. 31–32.

[42] *Ahl al-kitāb* is a debated term within Islam. Some scholars believe it only refers to Jews and Christians, and some scholars include other traditions like Hinduism and Sikhism. Harry S. Neale, *Jihad in Premodern Sufi Writings* (Springer, 2016), pp. 65–66; Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (Reaktion Books, 2004), p. 107.

[43] Raja Sakrani, 'The Dhimmi as the Other of Multiple Convivencias in Al-Andalus', *Rechtsgeschichte*, 26 (2018), pp. 94–138 (pp. 96–97, 111), doi:10.12946/rg26/095-138; Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, pp. 22, 38–39, 168; Neale, *Jihad in Premodern Sufi Writings*, p. 65.

the year 728 CE, long before Western Europeans developed the idea of religious freedom that is known today.[44]

Despite the different historical traditions that had implemented forms of religious freedom, some Western scholars still maintain that the notion of religious freedom as described in the UDHR is based on the Western European religious tradition.[45] This can be justified by researching the Western European history of the notion of FoRB and the interpretation of this today.[46] The legal notion of religious freedom can be traced back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. Different European countries were internally and externally in conflict due to the religious strife, which was partially caused by the Reformation.[47] These conflicts led to multiple peace treaties that produced a certain religious tolerance or religious freedom. Examples of these are the Union of Utrecht and the Edict of Nantes.[48] The notions of religious freedom that came out of these peace treaties were more practical than moral. This changed during the period of the Enlightenment when philosophers like John Locke and Voltaire started to argue for the separation of the church and the state, individual freedom of conscience, natural rights, and religious tolerance. According to philosophers like Spinoza and Hobbes, only strong states could facilitate religious freedom in societies that are split between different religions.[49] The influence of the religious wars and the Enlightenment thinkers after these should not be underestimated. For instance, the separation of church and state, whether it is realistic or not,

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44 Sakrani, 'The Dhimmi', p. 97; Étienne De La Vaissière, 'Sogdian Dimmī: Religious and Political Protection in Early 8th Century Central Asia', *Annales Islamologiques*, 54 (2020), pp. 165–176 (pp. 165–67), doi:10.4000/anisl.7908.

45 *Law, Religion, and Freedom*, ed. by Durham et al., pp. 25–27, 38; *Freedom of Religion*, ed. by Van De Beek, et al., p. 9.

46 It is again necessary to emphasise that, due to the confines of the article, this overview is limited. Nevertheless, to understand the Western interpretation and the criticism of it, a brief overview of its history is important.

47 *Freedom of Religion*, ed. By Van De Beek et al., p. 9.

48 *Freedom of Religion*, ed, by Van De Beek et al., p. 10.

49 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration: John Locke; Latin and English Texts Revised and Edited with Variants and an Introduction by Mario Montuori* (M. Nijhoff, 1963), p. 33; Voltaire, *A Treatise on Toleration* (Glasgow: Printed for Robert Urie, 1764), p. 87; *Freedom of Religion*, ed. by Van De Beek et al., p. 10; *Law, Religion, and Freedom*, ed. by Durham et al., pp. 48–49.

is still a predominant idea in Western politics.[50] Indeed, these ideas have also influenced the perception in Western society of freedom of religion. In both Europe and the United States, religious freedom is often seen as the protection of the individual and the collective against religious influence from the state. The law is not seen as a 'threat' against religions but rather protects the rights of religious groups. On the other hand, the law is also 'free' from religion in an ontological sense. This idea, nevertheless, took time to be implemented in the different legal systems, which is reflected in the fact that it has only been implemented in most European states in the twentieth century.[51]

The idea of religious freedom as a human right started to develop around the time of the Enlightenment and the Reformation, but some individual thinkers, such as Tertullian, already described it somewhere between the years 160–c.220 CE.[52] As mentioned before, forms of religious freedom and religious tolerance were implemented in different peace treaties and laws around this time. Consequently, different philosophers argued for the right to religious freedom to be seen as a natural right.[53] This idea of natural rights/laws comes out of a Christian tradition. The idea is that God has given this law or right to the human species, which they can implement in their systems so that their law has a divine significance.[54] Natural rights have been seen as an earlier form of human rights. For this reason, human rights foundations have been criticised because the natural laws have been secularised.[55] The idea, however, that every human being has natural rights for being

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[50] Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 3–4.

[51] *Law, Religion, and Freedom*, ed. by Durham et al., p. 11.

[52] Pál Sáry, 'The Emergence of the Idea of Religious Freedom in Ancient Rome', *Journal on European History of Law*, 13.2 (2022), pp. 107–113 (p. 110); Timothy Samuel Shah, 'The Roots of Religious Freedom in Early Christian Thought', in *Christianity and Freedom*, ed. by Timothy Samuel Shah and Allen D. Hertzke (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 33–61 (pp. 52–55).

[53] Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 52; *Law, Religion, and Freedom*, ed. by Durham et al., pp. 47–50.

[54] *Law, Religion, and Freedom*, ed. by Durham et al., p. 14; Freeman, *Human Rights*, pp. 52–53.

[55] On the topic of secularisation and human rights, different debates have occurred. I would recommend chapter 4 of Freeman's book *Human Rights*; *Law, Religion, and Freedom* ed. by Durham et al.; and Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

human remained, and together with this, so did the right to FoRB. Nevertheless, only after the Holocaust did Western countries realise that FoRB can easily be disregarded by governments. The horror of the war moved countries into action to create 'Universal Human Rights'.[56] According to David Little, the UDHR and particularly FoRB should be understood against this background. Article 18 has an extra focus on the individual choosing their own belief instead of having to follow the beliefs of the government. According to Little, it is not the content of the fundamental belief that is important, but rather the fact that one can choose what to believe. Included in this right is the freedom for one to manifest their faith in 'observance and practice'.[57]

Freedom of Religion in Pakistan

As described before, Pakistan's colonial background has a considerable influence on its lawmaking and, with this, the right to freedom of religion. Besides this, the battles for independence for Pakistan influenced the view of FoRB in Pakistan. Indeed, the Pakistan movement before the partition was focused on the notion of FoRB. Islam was a minority in India, and the movement sought religious tolerance for Muslims. After the partition, the leaders of this movement therefore implemented religious freedom in the constitution of Pakistan.[58]

During the founding of the UDHR, Article 18 received criticism from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia did not agree with the idea that one has the freedom to change one's religion. Saudi Arabia expressed their concern about Christian missionaries, and argued that this part of human rights legislation contradicted Islamic law. Interestingly, Pakistan criticised Saudi Arabia, and what followed was a theological discussion on an international political level. Pakistan stated that it is in line with

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[56] *Freedom of Religion*, ed. by Van De Beek et al., pp. 11–12.

[57] *Law, Religion, and Freedom*, ed. by Durham et al., p. 26.

[58] Ujala Akram, 'Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion and Islam: A Review of Laws Regarding Offences Relating to Religion in Pakistan from a Domestic and International Law Perspective', *European Journal of Law Reform*, 16.2 (2014), pp. 353–376 (pp. 355–356).

the Quran for one to have the freedom to change one's religion.[59] Lindkvist points out that Saudi Arabia did have a point concerning the power imbalance of Christian missionaries during colonial times. Indeed, according to Lindkvist, Christian missionaries have often misused their power under Western imperial regimes.[60] Yet, Pakistan also criticised this concern of Saudi Arabia. According to the representative of Pakistan, Islam is a religion of missionaries, and therefore, one should be allowed to change one's religion.[61] All in all, one can argue that Pakistan had a positive attitude towards the right to freedom of religion within the UDHR and openly discussed it. Over time, however, Pakistan has changed its perspective on the right to freedom of religion. This has caused internal tension between the Islamic law and a more secular constitution, which was based on the British Constitution.

The right to freedom of religion as described within the UDHR is the same as the right to freedom of religion as described in Pakistan's constitution of 1956. Nevertheless, the constitution also stated that Pakistan's principles are based on Islamic principles of social justice.[62] After a military coup in 1962 by Muslim extremists, a change was made within the constitution, stating that all new laws must not contradict the Quran and the Sunnah and that all existing laws should be changed according to this.[63] In 1973, the constitution was once again changed, stating that instead of being a Muslim country, Pakistan would be an Islamic State. Islam was declared the state religion, and a definition of a

[59] The representatives of Pakistan based this on Surah Al-Kahf 29, which says 'Whoever wills let them believe, and whoever wills let them disbelieve' (Quran 18:29).

[60] It should be noted that this view of Christian missionaries and their misuse of power in the colonies is criticised as an image. Indeed, Etherington argues that this created image is problematic because arguing that the people of the colonised country did not have anything to say against the missionaries undermines the agency of the colonised. For more on this, see Norman Etherington, *Missions and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2005), especially the introduction.

[61] Lindkvist, *Religious Freedom,* pp. 63–64.

[62] Government of Pakistan, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, passed by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan 29 February 1956 and assented by the Governor-General, art. 25, section 1-2. An online copy of the original can be accessed on the Fact Focus website <https://factfocus.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Constitution-of-Islamic-Republic-of-Pakistan-1956.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2025].

[63] Akram, 'Freedom of Speech', pp. 357–358.

Muslim was given for the law. Ten years later, a definition was made for a non-Muslim under the law. By doing so, Pakistan divided its society more clearly between Muslims and non-Muslims. As a result of these changes, the Federal Shariat Court, which had the purpose of creating Sharia laws and checking if existing laws were in line with the Quran and the Sunnah, received more power, resulting in more Islamic laws.[64]

Consequently, Pakistan has implemented multiple laws that can be seen from Western perspectives as violations of the initial interpretation of the UDHR right of freedom of religion. Most notable is the blasphemy law that was implemented in 1984. This law forbids any derogatory remarks about the Prophet Mohammed. Other laws were implemented to target specific minorities, like the Ahmadis.[65] Different cases of minority groups have shown limitations to the right of freedom of religion, resulting in criticism from different Western NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Open Doors, and from governmental institutions like the European Union and the United States.[66]

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[64] The Islamisation history of Pakistan described here is by necessity brief and, once more, it is impossible to set out its complexity within the limitations of the article. It should be noted that the 1956 Constitution of Pakistan permitted people to gather and share ideas. This allowed for the creation of different Islamic schools, which have led to different religious social movements. Some of these movements were more 'radical' than others, resulting in much tension within Pakistani society and politics. For more reading, see chapter 6 of Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also, Akram, 'Freedom of Speech', pp. 359–362.

[65] The Ahmadis are a minority group of people in Pakistan who follow the Ahmadiyya Islamic tradition. They have experienced different forms of discrimination since the Islamisation process of Pakistani law. For instance, following the formation of the definition of Muslim, Ahmadis were no longer recognised as Muslims under the law and therefore received different treatment. Besides this, members of the Ahmadi community have often been persecuted under the blasphemy law since they have a different view of the Islamic tradition than the government. For more reading on this topic, see Kayhan Özaykal, 'Messianic Legitimacy: The Case of Ahmadiyya and Mahdiyya Movements', *Journal of Istanbul University Faculty of Theology*, 35 (2016), pp. 217–256.

[66] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report*, 2023; Amnesty International, 'Pakistan: Authorities Must Ensure Protection of Minority Christian Community', 16 August 2023 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/pakistan-authorities-must-ensure-protection-of-minority-christian-community/> [accessed 3 November 2025]; Simon Visser, 'Pakistani Christian Couple Acquitted of Blasphemy Flees to Europe', 18 August 2021, Open Doors <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/pakistan-couple-

Reflection

So, how does the Freedom of Religion Act within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflect or contest postcolonial studies when looking at the case study of Pakistan? By analysing the historical approaches that have been taken in this research, a few nuanced conclusions can be drawn.

To start with, the idea that 'Western countries' are the ones who have constructed the idea of religious freedom is in itself open to challenge. Indeed, by looking at a few examples, like the Islamic traditions, one can see that even before the notion of religious freedom was established around the Enlightenment period in Western Europe, other cultures held similar ideas even before the Common Era. Thus, to claim that the notion of freedom of religion or religious tolerance is a reward of Western European modernisation is naïve and does not do justice to moral laws and rights of other cultures and traditions that developed similar notions beforehand.

Related to this is the claim that the UDHR and the act of freedom or religion within it is a Western construct which is being imposed on former colonies. This statement can likewise be challenged as inaccurate and, once again, unfair towards former colonies. Though it is true that it was only after the Second World War that Western countries felt the necessity to form a set of universal rights, they were not the only ones composing these rights. Indeed, countries like Pakistan have helped with the construction of the different rights within the declaration. Moreover, the rights within the UDHR were extensively discussed among the participating countries, including the former colonies of Western powers. An example is the discussion of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on the right to freedom of religion. Claiming that the voices of the former colonies have not been heard tends to dismiss these countries, and it undermines their agency. Besides this, former colonies

blasphemy/>; European Parliament, 'Resolution on The Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan, in Particular the Case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel (2021/2647(RSP)), P9_TA(2021)0157', 29 April 2021 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0157_EN.html> [accessed 3 November 2025].

have used the stage of the UN and the formulation process of the UDHR to create legitimacy for their own country.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the secular interpretation of the right to freedom of religion is influenced by the Western European philosophical tradition. According to this tradition, religious freedom is the protection of the individual and the collective from the state against state religious influence. The law protects the rights of religious groups and is not seen as a threat. At the same time, the law is 'secular', which means that it is free from religious influence at its core. To claim that this interpretation of the right to freedom of religion is universal would be incorrect. Indeed, by investigating the Islamic interpretations, one can see that the Western European interpretations contradict the Islamic interpretations of freedom of religion. This tradition says that the law can be influenced by religion. Thus, to unhesitatingly correct or to accuse Islamic countries like Pakistan of violating the right to freedom of religion would be culturally insensitive. Instead, a more nuanced and careful approach is needed if one desires to discuss the state of FoRB in former colonies such as Pakistan.

Conclusion

This article has delved into the complex interplay between postcolonial studies and the right to freedom of religion, focusing on the case study of Pakistan. As the article has shown, religious freedom is not solely a Western construct, as various cultures have historically embraced forms of religious tolerance. While Western countries have played a significant role in promoting universal human rights, they were not the sole architects of the UDHR. The article has highlighted that the UDHR's formation involved active participation and contributions from a variety of countries, including former colonies like Pakistan. Thus, characterising the UDHR as a Western imposition on non-Western countries is an oversimplification that neglects the active involvement of the latter in the creation of these rights. Furthermore, the interpretation of the right to freedom of religion can differ significantly between Western European and Islamic traditions. The Western view is rooted in the protection of the individual and collective from state

interference in religious matters while maintaining the secular nature of the law. Conversely, Islamic perspectives may allow for a greater influence of religious principles on the legal system. Lastly, the article has also elucidated how Pakistan's stance on freedom of religion has evolved, with a shift towards more restrictive interpretations and the implementation of laws that have been criticised for curtailing this right by Western organisations and governmental institutions. The study has shown that in light of these complexities, it is essential to approach discussions of freedom of religion, as in the case of Pakistan, with cultural sensitivity and a nuanced understanding of different traditions and interpretations. Recognising, however, the contributions of various cultures like Pakistan to the development of these principles and respecting the agency of former colonies in shaping international human rights agreements is imperative.

A few qualifications and suggestions are in order at this point. This article has been intentionally broad in scope to map the historical and conceptual terrain of FoRB in relation to postcolonial debates on the basis of secondary sources. That said, ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Pakistan could usefully clarify how legal norms translate into everyday practice for different communities, while more narrowly focused studies on, for instance, detailed legal analyses of specific statutes such as the blasphemy laws, could supply the depth that a broad overview cannot. Such studies may serve to strengthen the claims made in this study and help build a richer, more balanced discourse on FoRB.

Between Opposition and Dialogue: Anti-Racist and Anti-Fascist Practice Informed by Baptist Tradition

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Abstract
This article responds to the recommendation in Helen Paynter and Maria Power's *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity* (2024). In the face of a far-right appropriation of Christian symbols and concepts, this invites those in 'dissenting' Christian traditions to identify 'creative' ways to 'embody and articulate' dissenting values in 'fresh ways'. Informed by wider Baptist heritage, autobiographical reflections from practice, and particularly referring to the UK and Germany, the author argues for what he sees as the socio-political implications of a Christian anti-racist and anti-fascist practice, before setting out some tentative recommendations for individual and corporate Christian practice that seek to *differentiate* between the inclusive good news of Christianity and the Far Right's 'claims to Christianity', while *opposing* the *political parties*, *organisations*, *and initiatives* of the Far Right, and maintaining the possibility of robust *individual* dialogue with those who have lent their support to such.

Keywords
Anti-racism; anti-fascism; dialogue; Baptist tradition

Introduction

This origin of this article is in a response to the timely and important collection of papers edited by the Baptist scholar Helen Paynter and her Roman Catholic colleague Maria Power on *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*,[1] including an oral presentation made in one of

[1] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, ed. by Helen Paynter and Maria Power (SCM Press, 2024).

the seminars that was organised to engage with aspects of the book.[2] The article's aim is to focus on responding to the last of the book's ten key recommendations; namely that 'churches in the dissenting traditions should seek creative ways to draw on the deep values of dissent and democracy that they embody and to articulate these in fresh ways to their congregations of today and tomorrow'.[3]

The overall relevance and challenge in relation to the Far Right's 'claim to Christianity' is especially pertinent to the attempted appropriations of Christian symbols and concepts being made in some European countries. In the introduction to their book, Paynter and Power note that there is no consensus on the use of the term 'the Far Right'.[4] And, while it is in principle important to differentiate between the Far Right and other right-wing forces that have a more democratic orientation, much of what is advocated by the Far Right in extreme forms both builds upon and, in turn, feeds what have become tropes that are more widely amplified within the echo chambers of the wider right-wing populist environment, leading to the increasing normalisation of these tropes in broader political discourse.

The timeliness of Paynter and Power's book was evidenced by the fact that the publishers brought forward its originally planned date of publication in the light of the violent attacks on asylum-seeker hotels and on Muslims and their places of worship that took place in the United Kingdom (UK), and especially in England and Northern Ireland,

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[2] Book launch and panel discussion on *The Church, the Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, organised by the Centre for Baptist Studies and the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, at the Centre for Baptist Studies, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, 14 September 2024. Presentations at that event made by the editors of the book and by the present author are accessible via the Centre for Baptist Studies' You Tube channel, 'The Church, the Far Right and the Claim to Christianity Book Launch', CBS, 14 October 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfPZ7j-Uz3o> [accessed 12 November 2025]; and Paul Weller, 'Response 1', CBS, 14 October 2024 <https://youtube. com/9kzD0N6HOOM> [accessed 12 November 2024]. The Revd Professor Dr Paul Fiddes also made a response on the day.

[3] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, ed. by Paynter and Power, p. 191.

[4] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity,* ed. by Paynter and Power, pp. 3–7.

at the end of July and the beginning of August 2024.[5] These happened within a few weeks of the new Labour government and its Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, coming to power. They followed the fatal stabbings in Southport of three children and the injury of eight others. In relation to this, those whom the Prime Minister identified as 'far-right thugs' sought, through the rapid spread of social media disinformation, to exploit popular anger around these stabbings by (falsely) identifying the perpetrator of the attack as an asylum-seeker and/or a Muslim.

Many who were not themselves members of, or even necessarily sympathisers with, far-right groups or ideologies joined in with these events. But, equally, in contrast to the framing of these events by many media reports at the time, what took place was often far from the spontaneous gathering of general, public protests which then descended into violence. Rather, there was clear evidence that what took place was specifically organised and targeted by far-right forces which exploited broader public anger through connecting it with wider right-wing populist tropes concerning Muslims and asylum-seekers, and that this resulted in the threatening gathering of groups of people outside a number of mosques and places of asylum-seeker accommodation which, in some cases, also led to physical violence against these buildings.

Given their primarily Anglo-American market, the book's publishers will also have been aware of the relevance of Paynter and Power's book to the intensity of the 'culture wars' being fought out in the USA. In this, aspects of the 'claim to Christianity' were especially deployed in the run-up to the 5 November 2024 Presidential Election of Donald Trump and, following his election, have most recently been further stoked in the context of debates around the life and death by

[5] Rob Picheta, 'Rioters Carry Out Violent, Racist Attacks Across Several British Cities: What Happened, and What Comes Next', *CNN*, 7 August 2024 <https://edition.cnn.-com/2024/08/05/uk/uk-far-right-protests-explainer-gbr-intl/index.html> [accessed 17 October 2025].

assassination on 10 September 2025 of Charlie Kirk, and his role in relation to Christian Nationalism in the USA.[6]

Indeed, 'culture war' tensions also rose again in England in the wake of demonstrations held in late August and early September 2025 outside a hotel in Epping, Essex, which was being used to accommodate asylum-seekers and refugees, that took place in the wake of the arrest, trial, and conviction of one of those who had been resident there for, among other things, sexual assault on a fourteen-year-old girl. A widespread public hanging of St George flags[7] then took place across England in support of these protests in a way that (outside the context of major sporting events) has not been historically traditional in the country.

Then, on 13 September, a large demonstration was organised in London under the slogan of 'Unite the Kingdom' at which many St George and Union[8] flags were also in evidence. In addition, some of the demonstrators also carried crosses and chanted 'Christ is King', asserting forms of Englishness and Britishness through which Muslims were being defined as alien and Islam as a foreign religion in ways that were strongly condemned by the presidents of Churches Together in England.[9]

But the book is also very timely when seen in the context of the rise of both the Far Right and of the wider populist right wing in many other European countries. This includes, for example, Germany, which since early 2022 has been the author's country of formal and main

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[6] Mara Richards Bim, 'How Charlie Kirk Went from College Dropout to Trump Influencer', *Baptist News Global*, 10 September 2025 <https://baptistnews.com/article/how-charlie-kirk-went-from-college-dropout-to-trump-influencer-2/> [accessed 17 October 2025], from an original article published by *Baptist News Global*, 15 April 2025.

[7] The red cross on a white background is the national flag of England. It is associated with St. George, the warrior patron saint of England who has often been depicted as a crusader.

[8] The Union flag, often referred to as the 'Union Jack', consists of the cross of St. George, edged in white, superimposed on the red saltire of Saint Patrick (the patron saint of Ireland), also edged in white, superimposed on the blue saltire of Saint Andrew (the patron saint of Scotland). This is the flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Wales having already been incorporated into the English kingdom when the English flag was created).

[9] 'Church Leaders Express "Deep Concern" at Christian Symbols Used in Unite the Kingdom March', *Religion Media Centre*, 23 September 2025 <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/religion-news-24-september-2025/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

residence and, of which, since the summer of 2024, the author has also been a British–German dual national. Here, the seemingly inexorable rise of the political party the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*/Alternative for Germany) has been a powerful, if disturbing, reminder that the kind of nationalist furies that were unleashed in the UK's toxic Brexit debate by an increasingly confident tide of racism presenting itself in terms of the national interest are not confined to one part of Europe.[10]

Indeed, support for the AfD has continued to grow despite the fact that, in March 2020, the German *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (BfV, or Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) had formally classified the AfD's faction known as *Der Flügel* (the Wing, and which at the time probably included around 20% of the AfD's membership), as 'a right-wing extremist endeavour against the free democratic basic order' and as 'not compatible with the Basic Law'; and it then also having classified the *Junge Alternative für Deutschland* (or JA, which from 2015 until January 2025 was the official youth wing of the AfD) as 'confirmed right-wing extremist'.

Having failed in its legal appeals against the findings of the BfV, with regard to *Der Flügel*, the AfD leadership requested that it should dissolve itself, following which its website was taken offline; while, with regard to the JA, the party's January 2025 conference resolved to replace it with another youth body. And at the same party conference in the run-up to the February 2025 German Federal Election, one of its co-leaders, Alice Weidel, invoked the highly controversial language of 'remigration'[11] as a concept within which the party proposed to approach issues around migration and the claiming of asylum. In the Federal Election, just over 20% of the electorate (including over 17% in the author's small German hometown of Boppard-am-Rhine) voted for the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD).

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[10] Anthony Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (Routledge, 2019); and Paul Weller, 'Brexit: A Colonial Boomerang in a Populist World', *Social Justice*, 41.196 (2019), pp. 8–11 <https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/23839845/Binder2.pdf> [accessed 17 October 2025].

[11] Jessica Parker 'AfD Embraces Mass Deportation of Migrants as German Election Nears', *BBC News*, 13 January 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62q937y029o> [Accessed 17 October 2025].

Then, on 2 May 2025, on the basis of a 1100 page, currently still classified and officially undisclosed expert report, the BfV announced that, due to the overall party's 'extremist orientation' that 'disregards human dignity' the AfD as a whole was declared to be a 'confirmed right-wing extremist endeavour'.[12] Reacting to this, the AfD took out an urgent lawsuit against the BfV, in response to which, on 8 May, the BfV made a so-called 'standstill commitment', under which it would temporarily suspend the 'confirmed right-wing extremist endeavour' classification and remove the corresponding press release from its website. In the meantime, according to a recent *Politico* poll of polls, the AfD has recently been polling at around 27% of the electorate.[13]

In the light of all the above, the following section of the article will signpost some headlines of distinctive ways in which the heritage of Baptist theologies and ecclesiologies, as well as those of the broader 'dissenting' Christian traditions, might have things to contribute to the debate on Christian responses to the rise of the Far Right and especially to its 'claim to Christianity'. Following that, given that theology is always formed at the intersection between a broader tradition and what are necessarily contextualised and personal appropriations of it, the article will share some more autobiographically informed reflections that draw on my personal and professional practice from over nearly half a century as a Christian whose opposition to racism and fascism and engagement with inter-religious dialogue have both been, at least implicitly, and often explicitly, informed by aspects of the Baptist Christian heritage. Then in moving to its conclusion, the article makes a number of tentative recommendations for individual and corporate Christian practice in the context of, and in relation to, the seemingly inexorable rise of the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity'.

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[12] Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 'Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz stuft die "Alternative für Deutschland" als gesichert rechtsextremistische Bestrebung ein', 2 May 2025 <https://web.archive.org/web/20250502081336/https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2025/pressemitteilung-2025-05-02.html> [accessed 17 October 2025].

[13] 'German National Parliament–Voting Intentions', *Politico*, 13 October 2025 <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

Tropes of Nation and Faith: Christendom, Dissenting Traditions, and the Far Right

The majority of believing and practising Christians would want to dissociate themselves from the kind of violence that erupted in parts of England and Northern Ireland in August 2024, and from the 'remigration' rhetoric of the AfD in Germany (which is ever more frequently being partially mirrored in parts of the UK's political landscape[14]). However, across Europe there are also increasing currents of activity that promote aspects of the Far Right's ideology in ways which can be particularly seductive for those who identify themselves in terms of a Christian civilisational identity.[15]

In connection with these intersecting trends, one of the key underlying pillars of both the organised Far Right and also of wider contemporary right-wing populisms, is the differentiation of 'our' way of life as a nation and/or religion from that of 'others' (especially Muslims) even when they are either citizens or members of the wider civil society. In this context, aspects of a Christendom vision of society and support for what Stuart Murray calls its 'vestiges'[16] can (even if not intentionally) tend in practice to buttress the ideological positions and projects of the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity', as well as in the wider environment of right-wing populisms.

As one example of this, during a research project that I directed just over a decade ago on religion and belief, discrimination and equality in England and Wales, in an interview with an Anglican priest around the changed position of Christianity in the country, the respondent both poignantly and disturbingly stated that it is, 'almost like losing the empire all over again, it's just that it's the empire of your own country'.[17] In

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[14] Sam Francis and Georgia Roberts, 'Reform Plans to Scrap Indefinite Leave to Remain for Migrants', *The Independent*, 22 September 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c930xypxpqpo> [accessed 17 October 2025].

[15] *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks and Denominations*, ed. by Gionathan Lo Mascalo (Transcript Verlag, 2023).

[16] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Paternoster, 2004), pp. 188–200.

[17] Cited in Paul Weller, Kingsley Purdam, Nazila Ghanea and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts* (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 114.

speaking in such a way, this priest arguably revealed both the deeply rooted connections between Christendom inheritances and perspectives and colonialism, as well as a nostalgic unpreparedness for living in our world of increasing cultural and religious plurality.

In relation these issues, I would argue that the Baptist Christian heritage contains a theologico-ethical vision of a kind that can contribute distinctively to the evolution of an ecumenical Christian praxis which is capable of challenging the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity'. And, in addition, that it can do so by equipping contemporary Christians to live in more faithful, committed, and peaceful ways in a world of ever-increasing diversity of religion or belief,[18] the diversity of which the organised political forces of the Far Right and the sentiments of a broader right-wing populism ultimately see as a threat and want to roll back.

In setting out such a vision, it is hard not to begin with Thomas Helwys's remarkable seventeenth-century articulation of a theologically rooted, socially inclusive ethics of diversity as reflected in his famous declaration, 'Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.'[19] In this, of course, by referring to 'Turks', Helwys was in the language of his time and place referring to Muslims who have become one of the main targets for contemporary Far Right and wider right-wing populist 'othering' in terms of their portrayal as being 'alien' to socio-political projects that claim Christianity as a religio-cultural foundation.

By contrast, Helwys's statement affirmed the religion or belief freedom of the 'other' as having an individual and corporate theological and social legitimacy. This also had clear implications for a social ethic that secures religion and belief freedom from the state and/or any

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[18] Paul Weller, 'Less Christian, More Secular and More Religiously Plural: 21st Century Census Data as Contextual Challenge and Opportunity for Christian Presence and Witness in England', in *'Lived' Mission in 21st Century Britain: Ecumenical and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Victoria Turner, Ben Aldous, Peniel Rajkumar, and Harvey Kiwani (SCM Press, 2024), pp. 201–218.

[19] In Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612) by Thomas Helwys (ca. 1550–ca. 1616),* Classics of Religious Liberty 1, ed. by Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 1998) p. 53.

religious body within it imposing any required or established form of religion. Indeed, if anything comes close to being a Baptist 'universal' it is this theologico-ethical commitment to religion and belief freedom in combination with the affirmation of social equality between religious groups. For example, in terms of its practical application in nineteenth-century England, as set out in his 1999 book *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England*, Timothy Larsen pointed out that, in line with such a vision, the most radical dissenters of the time argue that it should 'rightly be applied to all citizens, even if they happened to be Hindus, Moslems, Mormons or atheists'.[20]

In further considering the relevance of this vision to contemporary far-right tropes around religion and culture, it is also important to understand that the vision is rooted in a theologically prior conviction that, however important nation and family may be, the good news of Christianity is an inclusive one of the possibility for individuals to have a fundamentally free, chosen, and responsible destiny rather than one that is merely inherited and/or assumed by virtue of being a member of particular people group, nation, or state. Such a socio-theological vision is most visibly embodied in the practice for which the Baptists are probably most widely known — namely that of offering Christian baptism on confession of faith — but in relation to which, the Baptist scholar and former Principal of Regent's Park College Henry Wheeler Robinson underlined that the tradition's 'plea for baptism becomes a mere archaeological idiosyncrasy, if it be not the expression of the fundamental constitution of the Church'.[21]

Thus, in advocating for an approach to baptism which differs from what has historically been the main practice in the Catholic, Orthodox, and majority Protestant traditions of Christianity, Wheeler Robinson emphasised that the Baptist tradition is 'testifying against much more than an isolated and relatively unimportant custom' and is rather 'testifying against the whole complex of ideas of which it was a

[20] Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (The Boydell Press, 1999), p. 239.
[21] Henry Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 2nd edn (Carey Kingsgate Press, 1946), p. 71.

symbol'.[22] In other words, at best, such Christendom approaches entail an insufficient differentiation between nation, society, the state, and religious communities; while at worst, they can lead to the capture of Christianity by projects that have sought to create and maintain social and religious homogeneity.

That such a 'complex of ideas' in combination with the interventions of organised far-right groups within a wider right-wing populist environment can have extremely serious consequences for both society and for the church can be seen in the history of what happened to the main so-called *Volkskirchen* Protestant Churches of Germany during the rise of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP or Nazi party). In this context, the NSDAP's appropriation and distortion of the central operative symbolisms and concepts of Christianity succeeded in capturing such a significant proportion of Protestant Christianity in Germany that a minority of Protestants became convinced that the development of a confessing church counter-project was necessary to save the soul of Christianity.

Indeed, at this point, in order that the arguments of this article about the value to ecumenical Christian praxis of aspects of the Baptist dissenting tradition should not be misunderstood as making either inappropriately imperious or a-historically idealistic claims, we need (albeit necessarily briefly) to draw attention to something of what was, during the Nazi period, the complexity and ambiguity of Baptists in Germany. Baptists had, for example, both been denied citizenship by the Prussian state and also for many years marginalised within German society under the perception of them being a 'foreign' religion. In this context, therefore, the emergence of the Third Reich seemed to present them with a wider degree of religious freedom than had previously been available to them, while the NSDAP's anti-Communism was also socio-politically seductive and attractive for many German Baptists. As Blake McKinny puts it,

[22] Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, p. 73.

> German Baptists present difficulties of categorization as many praised National Socialism for defeating communism but at other times chastised its anti-Semitism. They were at once both nationalistic and nationalistically suspect. They were a faith group well versed in varying levels of persecution, but they experienced their greatest liberty of practice to date under a regime renowned for its persecution of the churches.[23]

Symbolic of these ambiguities was the Fifth Baptist World Congress that took place in Berlin on 4 to 10 August 1933, which was only a few weeks after the 30 June to 2 July wave of political assassinations known as the 'Night of the Long Knives', and which cleared the way for Adolf Hitler, in his 13 July Reichstag speech, to present himself as supreme leader of the German people, beyond democracy and the rule of law. In this context, while the Congress advocated the separation of church and state and decried nationalism, and its Commission on 'Racialism' condemned both the colour bar and antisemitism, when referring to Hitler, the Congress's official report chose to highlight that 'it is reported that Chancellor Adolf Hitler gives to the temperance movement the prestige of his personal example since he neither uses intoxicants nor smokes'.[24]

The juxtaposition of this with the political earthquake of the still very recent 'Night of the Long Knives' sharply highlights not only the ambiguities but also the dangers to which those claiming to live within the Baptist tradition can be prone when, overall, albeit that it is recognised that the temperance movement was one that included important social dimensions, pietistic tendencies come to predominate over wider kingdom of God perspectives. And this, at least in part, explains why within the German *Kirchkenkampf*, although there were exceptions, the majority German Baptist position was to keep apart

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[23] Blake McKinny, '"One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism" in the Land of *ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*: The Fifth Baptist World Congress (Berlin, 1934)', *Church History*, 87.1 (2018), pp. 122–148 (pp. 147–148).

[24] *Fifth Baptist World Congress, Berlin, August 4–10, 1934: Official Report*, ed. by James Henry Rushbrooke (Baptist World Alliance, 1934), p. 52.

from both the so-called *Deutsche Christen* (or, 'German Christian') movement,[25] which advocated a *Völkish* Christianity, and also from the oppositional *Bekennende Kirche* (or, 'Confessing Church').[26]

In what eventually became such an extreme context, the extent to which such an attempt at a 'third way' either was or could ever be successful, is a matter of historical debate and evaluation with much depending on the criteria adopted for 'success'. But that it was attempted highlights what are likely also to be tensions across a spectrum of contemporary potential interpretations and applications of the Baptist Christian heritage in the face of choices about how to respond to contemporary social and political movements, which, at the least, might be evaluated as having conceptual and political echoes of what developed in Germany during the inter-war years. This is also so bearing in mind that, despite such 'alarm bell' events as the 'Night of the Long Knives', the NSDAP did not reach the initial peak of its sole governing power through the revolutionary overthrow of an extant democratic system, but rather through the development of an atmosphere of street thuggery in combination with an insidious consolidation of social and political power from within the democratic institutions of the time.

Bearing in mind all of this, among the challenging questions posed in Paynter and Power's collection were the following: In which context(s) and at what point might faithful Christian witness require the drawing of a clear line of demarcation *between* the content of Christian witness and the Far Right? Also, the question of whether, and if so in what circumstances, might it be appropriate for Christians dialogically to engage with persons who support far-right parties and organisations. And finally, when might faithful Christian witness demand the taking of a clear stance *against* such expressions?

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[25] Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
[26] Arthur Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (The Westminster Press, 1962).

Such questions will now be explored in the next part of this article through an autobiographically informed reflection on the author's almost half century of involvement in anti-racism and anti-fascism as a UK citizen and a Christian in the Baptist tradition of Christianity.

Anti-Racism, Anti-Fascism, and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Between 1997 and 1987 the main part of my personal Christian identity and of my professional life and work (at that time also as an accredited Baptist minister) was expressed in terms of an anti-racist and anti-fascist activism.[27] In the subsequent three decades, during which I became an academic scholar, albeit while still continuing to address matters relating to racism and fascism,[28] an engagement came to predominate with matters of religion and belief freedom, equality and discrimination, together with an involvement in the development of dialogical theory and practice, especially in relation to inter-religious relations,[29] until after my retirement from full-time employment in higher education when I began once again to also re-engage more strongly and explicitly with anti-racism and anti-fascism.[30] And, indeed, over the past half century, the convergence of anti-racist, anti-fascist, and inter-religious dialogical

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27 Paul Weller, *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* (Christians Against Racism and Fascism/One for Christian Renewal, 1984), available online via <https://www.academia.edu/51117192/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

28 Paul Weller, 'The Changing Face of Europe: The Nature and Role of Ethnic Minorities in European Societies', in *Ethnic Churches – A Baptist Response*, ed. by Peter Penner (European Baptist Federation/International Baptist Theological Seminary, Neufeld Verlag), pp. 17–63; Paul Weller, 'Between Prophetic Symbolism, Pastoral Practice and Parliamentary Process: Religious Groups and the Practice of Sanctuary in the UK', in *L'Asile Religieux: Entre Désobéissance Civil et Obligation Légale/Giving Sanctuary to Illegal Immigrants: Between Civil Disobedience and Legal Obligation*, Les Éditions Revue de Droit de l'Université de Sherbrooke, ed. by Lorraine Derrocher, Claude Gélinas, Sebastien Lebel-Grenier, and Pierre Nöel (Université de Sherbrooke, Quebec), pp. 203–239.

29 Paul Weller, 'My Inter-Faith Journey', in *Faith and Society Files: Inter-Faith Journeys*, Baptists Together, 2013), pp. 24–26 <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/370321/Inter_Faith_Journeys.aspx> [accessed 17 October 2025].

30 Paul Weller, "'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority" Revisited: A Personal, Theological and Political Review', *Practical Theology*, 15.1 (2022), pp. 23–26, doi:10.1080/1756073X.2021.2023950> [accessed 12 November 2025].

work has become ever-clearer, as both racism and fascism have taken on ever more 'religionised' forms, especially in relation to Muslims.

During the late 1970s, the then main party-political expression of the Far Right in the UK was the National Front. And in the early years of my work as a team minister in the (Baptist and United Reformed Church) Tameside Fellowship of Churches, in Greater Manchester, the National Front organised a provocative march through the towns of Dukinfield and Hyde in which there were significant numbers of people with a South Asian background. In that context, when a pig's head was left outside the door of a mosque in Hyde, in what was probably my first conscientised political act of Christian anti-racism and anti-fascism, informed by my Baptist Christian predilection to affirm freedom of religion or belief as inclusive also of Muslims, I felt called to visit the affected mosque. This was in order both to express solidarity with these Muslims by taking a clear stand against the National Front and such kinds of actions, and also against the wider social and political atmosphere that had enabled the emergence and development of this party.

During the early 1980s, I was substantially involved as an activist in Christians Against Racism and Fascism (CARAF) becoming, between 1982 and 1988, a member of its national executive committee; its secretary in 1985–1986; and its vice-chair in 1987–1988. CARAF was an example of a Christian initiative that took very clear anti-racist and anti-fascist positions in ways that some other Christians at the time found not only too 'negative' in substance (as reflected in its name that was clearly *against* something) but also as rather combative in style. At this time, among other things, I also worked with colleagues from predominantly Jewish and secular backgrounds who, at considerable personal risk, contributed journalistically to the important and still regularly published anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*, which does precisely what its name suggests in terms of shining a light of exposure into the nooks, crannies, and hidden places of the Far Right in the UK and across Europe more generally.[31]

[31] *Searchlight* is now available only online at <https://searchlightmagazine.com/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

During much of this period, learning from the experience and warnings of other activists in this field, I adopted the practice of using a letter opener in relation to the post that I received. This was because, at that time, far-right groups had developed a particularly nasty practice of sending to individuals whom they wanted to target, envelopes that contained a small razor blade in the seal at the place where one might otherwise use a finger to open the letter.

It was also during this period that, in 1983, I wrote an essay called *Thinking the Unthinkable and Saying the Unsayable*,[32] the title of which referenced John Casey's call, in the journal *The Salisbury Review*, for thinking the unthinkable in relation to the potential repatriation of immigrants.[33] This stance was also amplified by the *Review's* editor, Roger Scruton, who wrote a letter to the *Guardian* newspaper saying that 'it is our job to re-open the argument by saying the unsayable' [34] — in relation to which both were advocating 'voluntary repatriation' of people with migrant backgrounds which at the time was also being promoted by the Conservative Member of Parilament, Harvey Proctor.[35]

My essay was later re-published (as one of three related essays) in a 1985 booklet published under the title of *The New Right and the Church*.[36] Without my explicitly referencing Baptist Christian perspectives (but certainly in at least an implicit way informed by them) in a context in which the political discourse of racism and fascism was becoming ever-more frequently expressed in cultural and religious

[32] Paul Weller, 'Thinking the Unthinkable and Saying the Unsayable: A Christians Against Racism and Fascism', Occasional Paper (One for Christian Renewal/Christians Against Racism and Fascism, 1983).

[33] John Casey, 'One Nation: The Politics of Race', *The Salisbury Review* (Autumn 1982), pp. 23–27.

[34] Roger Scruton, 'Letters to the Editor', *The Guardian*, 1 March 1983.

[35] Harvey Proctor, *Immigration, Repatriation and the Commission for Racial Equality* (London: The Monday Club, 1981).

[36] David Edgar, Kenneth Leech, and Paul Weller, *The New Right and the Church* (Jubilee Group, 1985). Ken Leech was an Anglo-Catholic socialist priest, anti-racist, and anti-fascist, while David Edgar is a playwright and co-author of the recently published analysis of right-wing populism, John Bloomfeld and David Edgar, *The Little Black Book of the Populist Right: What It Is, Why It's on the March and How to Stop It* (Byline Books, 2024).

terms, my essay of the time sought to critique the danger of attempts to 'identify "our" (who are "we" anyway?) way of life with Christianity in such a way that reinforcement is given to policies, practices and attitudes which define British Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews as essentially "alien"'.[37] This essay also highlighted and critiqued the way in which, in the context of the promotion of arguments in favour of cultural homogeneity by these 'New Right' thinkers, Roger Scruton in his book *The Meaning of Conservatism* had invoked a model of the Christian religion as being a glue of the social order, with regard to which he went so far as to argue that, in relation to any future religious revivals, it will be 'politically important to guide the direction that they take' and that 'the restoration of the Church could well become a serious political cause'.[38]

As mainly a by-product of a change in my marital circumstances which led to my no longer being able to continue on the accredited list of Baptist Ministers, in 1988 I became the Resources Officer of the then new Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. During this time, the focus of my Christian identity, activism, and scholarship became ever more involved in inter-religious dialogue. In a subsequent role as an academic scholar in the study of religion at the University of Derby (1990–2016), I became (in 1998) Professor of Inter-Religious Relations and developed a specialist focus on research into the nature and extent of unfair treatment and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.

Both before and during this period, and not least because of the encouragement and opportunity provided by the Baptist Permanent Private Hall of the University of Oxford, Regent's Park College,[39] and its then Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, I also became increasingly engaged in working on ways in which the theological and ecclesiological dimensions of Baptist tradition and heritage might be interpreted and both explicitly and implicitly applied to contemporary

[37] Weller, 'Thinking the Unthinkable and Saying the Unsayable', p. 6.
[38] Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Pelican, 1980), p. 175.
[39] Regent's Park College, University of Oxford <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/> [accessed 17 October 2025].

religion and belief, state and society relationships, including their implications for the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue.[40]

In this work, while advocating for freedom of religion or belief I also advocated for use of the law in promoting religious equality, challenging religious discrimination, and curbing incitement to religious hatred. In relation to this, some might argue that a readiness to countenance such a use of the law runs counter to what has so far been presented concerning the theological and ecclesiological resources that the Baptist tradition can offer in engaging with the Far Right and its 'claim to Christianity'.

However, while the Baptist heritage does include a fundamental confidence in the power of truth to prevail in the context of the free exchange of convictions, the mainstream of the Baptist Christian tradition has also recognised an important role for the law, including its coercive instruments, in maintaining the peaceful social conditions needed for free expression, and in advancing justice within the wider civil society. For example, the black Baptist pastor and civil rights activist Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr is widely known for having made an argument about the importance — as reflected in the title of the 1963 collection of his sermons *The Strength to Love*[41] — of believing in the

[40] Paul Weller, 'Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective Part I', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 33.6 (1990), pp. 252–264, doi:10.1080/0005576X.1990.11751834; Paul Weller, 'Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective. Part II', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 33.7 (1990), pp. 302–314, doi:10.1080/0005576X.1990.11751834; Paul Weller, 'Balancing Within Three Dimensions: Christianity, Secularity and Religious Plurality in Social Policy and Theology', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift/Bern Interreligious Oecumenical Studies*, 3 (2016), published as a special themed issue on Religious Minorities and Interreligious Relations: Social and Theological Challenges of the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 26.2 (2016), pp. 131–146, doi:10.2143/SID.26.2.3200411; Paul Weller, 'Religious Minorities and Freedom of Religion or Belief in the UK', *Religion and Human Rights: An International Journal*, 13 (2018) pp. 1–34, doi:10.1163/18710328-13011160; Paul Weller, 'Changing Socio-Religious Realities, Practical Negotiation of Transitions in the Governance of Religion or Belief, State and Society', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift/Bern Oecumenical Studies*, 5, published as a special themed issue on Secular Society and Religious Presence: Religion-State Relations of the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 30.2 (2020), pp. 145–162, doi:10.2143/SID.30.2.3288770; and Paul Weller, 'Historical Sources and Contemporary Resources of Minority Christian Churches: A Baptist Contribution', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, 111.3-4 (2021), pp. 140–157.

[41] Martin Luther King Jr, *The Strength to Love* (Harper & Row, 1963).

power of love to confront and overcome racism and to transform those whose lives had become constricted by it.

But King did not see this emphasis as being incompatible with the coercive use of law. Rather, as he put it in a 27 December 1962 speech in Nashville, Tennessee, 'Judicial decrees may not change the heart; but they can restrain the heartless.' [42] And, as we saw over the summer of 2024 in the UK, the use of such a restraint of the heartless can be extremely important in giving Muslims, asylum-seekers, and others who were targeted by organised far-right activity at least some restored sense of security in the face of both the general threat and the actuality of physical violence.

And, indeed, King's position with regard to such matters was not idiosyncratic in relation to the Baptist heritage. Thus, in early seventeenth-century debates with the Mennonites, apart from in matters directly relating to the practice of freedom of religion and belief, Baptists did not in general rule out what, in the language of the times, was referred to as the use of 'the sword'. This did not mean approval for individual retributive violence. Rather it referred to the potentially and actually beneficial use of legally based coercion when exercised in ways concerned with upholding, defending, and extending the conditions of social peace and justice of a kind that enabled the wider enjoyment of freedom, including that of religion or belief.

Therefore, in contrast to many Mennonites of the time, Baptists generally allowed their church members to become magistrates. And while quite a number of Mennonites recognised the civil benefits to society of the office of magistrate, Thomas Helwys, who so strongly advocated for freedom of conscience and religion, criticised those among the Dutch Mennonites whom he perceived as having attacked the office of the magistrate whilst having benefited from the protection of the Dutch rule of law in the face of the Duke of Alba's persecution of non-Catholic Christians:

[42] King, *The Strength to Love*, p. 37.

> Of all the people on earth none hath more cause, to be thankful to God for this blessed ordinance of Magistracy than you, and this whole country and nation, in that God hath by his power and authority given unto you magistrates who have so defended and delivered you from the hands of a cruel destroyer, and will you notwithstanding condemn this ordinance, and consider it a vile thing.[43]

Thus, in seeking to understand how key historical, theological, and ecclesiological sources and resources from the Baptist dissenting heritage might become contemporary resources, I would argue that it is likely that the law of the wider civil society will have an important role to play, including, on occasion, through the use of force to 'restrain the heartless'. In addition, and notwithstanding its own ambiguities and failures in practice, I would argue that the vision of the Baptist dissenting heritage can indeed, at least in principle, offer creatively distinctive resources for challenging religious and/or ideological projects in which the relationship between religion and nation, state and society become instrumentalised in the service of the other. More broadly, in relation to such projects and the dangers involved in them, in his 1992 journal article on 'Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India', the Indian political scientist Achin Vanaik has set out what I think is as good as possible, a 'secular' articulation of some of the key aspects of what the Baptist dissenting vision has to offer in this regard:

> To say that politics and religion should be kept separate is understandable, especially at a time like ours. But what it really should mean is that politicians should not use religions for short-term political ends and religious leaders should not use politicians for narrowly communal gains. But surely every religion has a social and public dimension. To say that religions should be a private affair is to misunderstand both religion and politics.[44]

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[43] Thomas Helwys, *An Advertisement or Admonition Unto the Congregations, which men call the New Fryelers in the Lowe Countries*, quoted in Timothy George, 'Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 58.1 (1984), pp. 30–49 (38).

[44] Achin Vanaik, 'Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India', *New Left Review*, 196 (1992), pp. 43–62 (p. 56).

Towards Some Recommendations for Individual and Corporate Christian Practice

Informed by the author's personal appropriation of the wider Baptist Christian heritage, in considering a range of theoretical and concrete options for how to respond to far-right ideologies, parties, organisations, and projects, the closing section of this article concludes with a number of recommendations for individual and corporate Christian practice along the spectrum of to 'differentiate between', to 'dialogue with', and to 'struggle against'. In making bold to offer these recommendations, I will preface them with words from another great foundational figure of the Baptist tradition of Christianity, namely John Smyth who, in advocating for what he thought was right in his place and time, wisely acknowledged that 'we are in constant error; my earnest desire is that my last writing may be taken as my present judgment'.[45]

While taking seriously Smyth's cautionary warning, I would want to begin by advocating as clearly as possible that, in relation to the Far Right, it is of fundamental importance for Christians individually and corporately not only to *differentiate* the inclusivity of the good news to which Christianity is called to bear witness from exclusionary Far Right ideologies, but also to be *opposed* to, and actively to take part in the struggle *against*, the political, organisational embodiments and initiatives of far-right ideologies, and especially so when these make a 'claim to Christianity' by appropriating Christian concepts and symbols for exclusionary purposes.

At the same time, in a wider social sense, it is arguably important for the properly inclusive functioning of a democracy to recognise that those who vote for and/or support such parties, organisations, and initiatives, and/or advocate wider right-wing populist tropes may not be ideologically wedded to these and may therefore be lending their support out of a range of motivations. Indeed, at the level of persons, one of the remarkable things that emerged within the context of the threatening gatherings that took place in England in August 2024 outside of mosques and asylum-seeker accommodation is that, in the

[45] John Smyth, quoted in Paul Ballard, 'The Dynamic of Independency', *Baptist Quarterly*, 23 (1969–1970), p. 246.

face of a considerable sense of not only psychological but also actual physical threat, there were examples of dialogical engagement with at least some of the individuals and groups who had gathered outside these places under the influence of organised far-right agitation.[46]

If Muslims, who in this context were the group most immediately affected by such events, could find the capacity to engage dialogically, there is surely at least a question about whether and the extent to which Christians should also be ready and able to engage in such ways. From a specifically Christian perspective, the inclusive vision of humankind which derives from the affirmation that *all* human beings have been created by the divine and are included in the good news's offer of potential liberation for *all*, holds out the promise of ultimate horizons which should at least allow the possibility of taking a 'bigger view' of persons who, without having a strong ideological commitment to the Far Right, may for all kinds of other reasons lend their support its political and wider organisational expressions and initiatives. Indeed, some of the concerns expressed by persons within a right-wing populist milieu may, at root, not be contrary to kingdom of God values, even if they have in practice become distorted and weaponised through their exclusionary use against other groups. At the same time, informed by the experience of Christians who have attempted dialogical engagement, Paynter and Powers point in their book to cautions and warnings with regard to how such attempts can all too easily be used/misused by far-right groups.[47]

In the light of all this, I would suggest that there is a case for differentiating the question of dialogical engagement with persons who may express support for the Far Right, from that of the desirability or otherwise of 'corporate' Christian dialogue with the parties, organisations, and initiatives of the Far Right. And, in the final analysis, it is likely that a careful and difficult exercise of what the wider Christian tradition refers to as discernment will be required. For myself, taken in

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[46] Adam Kelwick, 'Protesters Came to Vandalise my Mosque – I Offered Them a Hug Instead', *Metro*, 5 August 2024 <https://metro.co.uk/2024/08/05/far-right-protestors-gathered-outside-mosque-opened-doors-21364206/ [accessed 17 October 2025].

[47] *The Church, The Far Right and the Claim to Christianity*, ed. by Paynter and Powers, pp. 178–179.

the round, and in the light of the important injunction of Jesus to his disciples to be not only 'gentle as doves' but also as 'wise as serpents',[48] I am persuaded that Christian dialogical engagement of a more organisational kind with ideologies, parties, organisations, and initiatives that contain substantial elements which have a clearly evidenced intention of undermining a society's ethnic and religious inclusivity would, at the very least, not be wise.

This is because whatever ambiguities may inform the electoral and related stances of individuals who support either far-right political parties, organisations, or initiatives, or those of wider right-wing populisms, the historical evidence would suggest that once these have collectively coalesced into powerful and organised social, political, and historical forces, this can all too quickly lead to the shrinking of a society's democratic inclusivity and therefore also of its dialogical space. In this context, those who argue that it might be better to try to 'tame' and 'moderate' either far-right or broader right-wing populist political forces by incorporating them into the responsibilities of governance, should not overlook that Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP came to power precisely through using democratic processes before they set about systematically dismantling them.

Taking all this into account, as Karl Loewenstein argued in his then timely and arguably still relevant two-part 1937 article on 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights',[49] democracies are not obliged to facilitate their own overthrow. Thus, while democratic societies need to allow as much space as possible for inclusive dialogical engagement, such a mode of engagement is unlikely to be completely and always sufficient. And in the light of this, it seems to me that it is neither incompatible with democracy nor with the Baptist inflection of the Christian heritage to recognise that a society and a state may, in some circumstances, need to place constraints upon the corporate activities of far-right parties and organisations — as long as the imposition of such

[48] Matt 10:16.

[49] Karl Loewenstein, 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights I', *American Political Science Review*, 31.3 (1937), pp. 417–432; and Karl Loewenstein 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights II', *American Political Science Review*, 31.4 (1937), pp. 638–658.

constraints takes place within the overall rule of law, within which those so constrained continue to have opportunity to present relevant evidence which might contest the legitimacy, nature, and extent of any constraints imposed upon their freedom.

In conclusion, then, the Christian tradition reminds us of the need always to take the 'bigger view' of persons in terms of their potential for dialogical change and development. In addition, the Baptist inflection of that tradition contains a theological anthropology which affirms a confidence in the power of truth itself to prevail in the context of conflicting interpretations of religion or belief. Nevertheless, taken in the round, the defence and preservation of the foundational possibilities of a dialogical and therefore democratically inclusive society means that Christians in Europe (including those in the Baptist tradition) would do well to recognise the limits of dialogue with persons of the Far Right. Therefore, as was reflected in the name Christians Against Racism and Fascism, while remaining cautiously open to the engaging in individual dialogue with persons who have lent their support to far-right ideologies, parties, organisations, and initiatives, Christians should also recognise the imperative of adopting a clear theological positionality and social practice *against* the Far Right in terms not only of its ideological content, but also its party political and other organisational forms and initiatives.

Why Women Doing Theology Matters for Everyone: Sexual Violence, Tainted Legacies, and the Integrity of Anabaptist Theology

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Abstract
With the now public knowledge of the sexual abuse carried out by the twentieth century's leading pacifist Mennonite theologian, the tainted legacies we are left with raise questions not only about the content of theology but also about the way theology is done. This article explores why women doing theology matters for everyone as part of the process of theology-making. It considers how the notion of taint is refracted through gender power relations to apply differently to women than to men and how this hinders the reception of women's theological contributions. It argues that women doing theology matters because of the way this illuminates the partiality of everyone's theology and, further, is necessary for the integrity of Anabaptist theology in the wake of sexual violence.

Keywords
Tainted legacies; sexual violence; theology that is feminist; Anabaptism; John Howard Yoder

Introduction

As my title indicates, this article is about theology, about women doing theology, and why that matters for everyone.[1] In this instance, my focus is not with advocating for church and academy to converse more with the theology that women produce — although that is certainly something I would be glad to see happening, especially that theology which emerges from feminist or womanist commitments. Rather, my contention here is that we have yet to comprehend what the implications of such theology are for *all* theological endeavour and, specifically, for the integrity of Anabaptist theology. This latter is a

[1] The first version of this article was presented as the Annual Lecture of the Centre for Anabaptist Studies, Bristol Baptist College, UK, on 22 November 2023.

pressing question given the impact of sexual violence on Anabaptist theological legacies, which are now understood as tainted.

Understanding Tainted Legacies

We are becoming more familiar with the idea of tainted legacies. An example from my own UK context comes from Bristol. There, the impact of a tainted legacy was keenly felt regarding the memorialisation in a statue of the town's benefactor who earned his fortune in part by his involvement in a company that had a monopoly on the West African Slave trade in the seventeenth century. In 2020, in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests and against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with city council inaction, citizens in Bristol took matters into their own hands and removed the statue of Edward Colston, toppling it from its plinth and pushing it into Bristol Harbour.[2]

Underpinning that incident is a debate, often contentious and understandably emotive, about how we respond to the growing public acceptance that sometimes what we have inherited and was previously lauded as good, and indeed did good, is enmeshed in, and indeed inseparable from, that which is not good; in this instance, some of Bristol's prosperity and wellbeing which was resourced from the buying, selling, and exploitation of Black human beings by white human beings. To describe this as a tainted legacy acknowledges that there are things that we inherit that have ethically compromised origins which cannot simply be assigned as belonging to the past and without contemporary consequence. Such acknowledgement, however, is only a starting point. We then have the question of how to respond to this knowledge: what is required of us now? What do we do with remainders, what are the possibilities of repair to harms done, and how do we decide?

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[2] Haroon Siddique and Clea Skopeliti, 'BLM Protesters Topple Statue of Bristol Slave Trader Edward Colson', *The Guardian*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/07/blm-protesters-topple-statue-of-bristol-slave-trader-edward-colston> [accessed 28 February 2023]; Martin Farrer 'Who Was Edward Colston and Why Was His Bristol Statue Toppled?', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/08/ > [accessed 28 February 2023].

In answer to these questions, Karen Guth theorises that 'tainted legacies' describe a 'distinct moral problem',[3] which in her context of the United States of America is common to the confederate monuments debate, the matter of slavery reparations in educational institutions, and sexual violence perpetrated by various artists and one theologian in particular, namely John Howard Yoder. Her concern is that this moral problem points to the need not only to redress past and present injuries of tainted legacies, but also to 'consider the deeper structural injustices that enabled them, enacting a justice that wards against those harms in the future'.[4] Specifically with regard to sexual violence, she states our attention should be on the 'cultural, structural, and institutional reforms needed to promote women's flourishing'.[5] This is because abusive legacies (of whatever kind) exist within conceptual and material frameworks — our ways of thinking and doing — and it is these that need to be interrogated for the extent to, and ways in which, they have enabled the abuse in the first place.

My focus in this article is with responding to the tainted legacy of sexual violence on Anabaptist theology. It is necessary here to name that we now know that Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (hereafter JHY[6] except in citations), who was once considered 'the preeminent pacifist theologian of twentieth-century Christian ethics',[7]

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[3] Karen Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies: Human Flourishing after Traumatic Pasts* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 26.

[4] Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 30.

[5] Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 91.

[6] How we refer to JHY is not an inconsequential matter. The masculinist trend to use surnames seems inappropriate given that Yoder is not an uncommon name among Mennonites. (This convention also tends to obscure women's visibility in published work given the presumption of male authorship in the male-dominated field of theology, which is why my usual naming convention is to provide full names on each mention.) Elizabeth Soto Albrecht uses John Howard Yoder's initials rather than his full name as 'an act of resistance and liberation', in Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, 'Preface', in *Liberating the Politics of Jesus*, ed. by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens (T&T Clark, 2020), pp. xiii–xvi (p. xiv). Indeed, the repeated use of JYH's name in and of itself can be an offence as once again attention gets focused on him rather than on the need to attend to the harm he caused and the conditions that enabled it. Naming is unavoidable; initials are used here in order to be specific while attempting to mitigate against the repetition of a name that, for many — not least those who have been harmed (directly or indirectly) — causes distress.

[7] Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 7.

was a sexual predator who, over three decades of his adult life, abused his authority and theology to violent ends against women. This naming is not done to vilify or dehumanise him, but rather serves two purposes. First, it ensures that this man's status as a revered theologian does not result in his behaviour being treated in a different light to that of other sexual predators who lack such community standing; in other words, he was not simply a theologian whose behaviour failed to live up to his theological ethics. And secondly, naming what happened as sexual violence brings with it the understanding that such abuse is fundamentally about power. As Ruth Krall explains, 'Sexual abuse is the methodology by which sexually or gender abusive perpetrators seek to manipulate, control and dominate the lives of their chosen victims.'[8] This analysis is crucial not only in dealing with the remainders of this tainted legacy — which include JHY's theology — but in addressing the deeper conceptual and structural injustice on which such abuse relies. Rachel Waltner Goossen's historical study of the last twenty-five years of JHY's life, which investigated the scope of his abuse and Mennonite institutional responses to it, is a story of women's lack of power within gender relations wherein their voices were muted, their experiences left unaddressed, and their safety and wellbeing ignored or made secondary to the interests of a prevailing male theological and religious status quo.[9] JHY himself used theology along with his institutional positions, intellectual authority, and academic reputation not only to carry out his abuse but to avoid accountability. Women he harmed struggled to get institutional support or have an informed analysis of the male-dominated framework, where 'male prerogative was simply taken for granted',[10] brought to bear on what was happening. The power that JHY was able to exert in his abuse was exacerbated by the unequal gender power relations for women in church and academy, where 'silence,

[8] Ruth Krall, *The Elephants in God's Living Room*, *Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder, Collected Essays* (Enduring Space Publications, 2013), p. 9, <https://ruthkrall.com/books/the-elephants-in-gods-living-room-series/volume-three-the-mennonite-church-and-john-howard-yoder-collected-essays/> [accessed 23 May 2022].

[9] Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast": Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 89 (2015), pp. 7–60.

[10] Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast'", p. 43.

patriarchal assumptions, and concern for damage control'[11] perpetuated and prolonged the harm. These are part of the deeper structural injustices referred to by Karen Guth that are bound up in tainted legacies and which need to be addressed and why, I am arguing, women doing theology matters for everyone.

What does it mean to view JHY's theological legacy as tainted? This has been an evolving story partly because although far more was known than openly acknowledged during JHY's lifetime and subsequently, it was only in the mid-2010s that information about his abuse was readily available and circulated.[12] Initially, the most prominent voices were those that sought either to rehabilitate JHY or to separate his work from his predatory actions, thereby leaving his theology unaffected.[13] The wider cultural zeitgeist in respect of gender-based violence expressed, for example, in the #MeToo movement, makes the rehabilitation of JHY — and other theologians who are sexual violence perpetrators — less palatable and plausible, though that does not necessarily extend to his theology. Voices that call for a thorough examination of JHY's theology in the light of his abuse to see, in the words of Ruth Krall, 'if, where and how his theology has been stunted, twisted, misshapen, or otherwise damaged by his long-term management of his personal life'[14] are beginning to be heard, although these are relatively few.[15] The legacy question, however, is unavoidable, even if not addressed directly — for example, those who simply now exclude JHY's work without comment are contributing to what a legacy looks like, arguably (whether intentionally or not) facilitating the silence around sexual violence and the structures in which it thrives. My view is that how we deal with this particular tainted legacy is a matter of the integrity of Anabaptist theology.

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[11] Goossen, '"Defanging the Beast"', p. 80.

[12] This was particularly through the work of Goossen, '"Defanging the Beast"'.

[13] See Fran Porter, 'Facing Harm: What to Do with the Theology of John Howard Yoder?', *Anabaptism Today*, 4.1 (2022), pp. 4–5, available online <https://www.academia.edu/87928115> [accessed 15 November 2025].

[14] Krall, *Elephants*, p. 187.

[15] A good example is Isaac Samuel Villegas, 'The Ecclesial Ethics of John Howard Yoder's Abuse', *Modern Theology*, 37.1 (2021), pp. 191–214, doi.org/10.1111/moth.12623.

The Gendering of Taint

Regardless of the particular stance taken, I have been struck by the juxtaposition of the notion of taint as it manifests with reference to JHY's theological legacy and how it is frequently applied to women in contexts of sexual violence. It seems to me that 'taint' is refracted through gender power relations to apply differently to women than to men. So often in cases of sexual violence against women, men have been listened to, while women have not been heard; men have been believed, while women have been doubted; men have been excused, while women have been blamed; men's reputations have been protected, while women's characters have been maligned. And when it comes to theology: men's legacies are now viewed as tainted whereas, throughout the centuries, women themselves have been viewed as the taint; even now as men's words are being preserved, redeemed, or lauded still, women's speech — not least in their telling of their own stories of experiences of sexual violence — is yet normatively to be held with equal esteem, garner similar respect, or be viewed as reliable or authoritative for everyone. As Leigh Gilmore has said,

> Tainting women's testimony is a familiar element in ancient and modern cultures. In the law, both unreliable witnesses and degraded evidence are said to be tainted. The term carries both the physical properties of stain and impurity as well as the metaphorical suggestion of ruination. Women's testimony is frequently associated with unreliability because it is women's testimony. Doubting women is enshrined in the law, represented in literature, repeated in culture, embedded in institutions, and associated with benefits like rationality and objectivity. Quite simply, women encounter doubt as a condition of bearing witness. On the whole, women's testimony is greeted individually and in aggregate as messy, conflictual, and compromised.[16]

JHY's abuse is known to date back to the mid-1970s when it first came to the attention of Mennonite authorities. Much later, in 1992, a group of eight women, among whom were ministers, missionaries, and faculty members of Mennonite institutions, met the members of the recently formed JHY Task Force, which was one of the seven Mennonite institutional attempts between 1980 and 1997 to deal with

[16] Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (Columbia University Press, 2017), pp 19–20.

JHY's actions.[17] These eight women gave first-hand accounts of their experiences of unwanted sexual approaches by JHY, with detailed and credible accounts of his sexual abuse extending back nearly two decades. After their stories had been shared, one of the women addressed each Task Force member in turn, calling each one by name and asking them, 'do you believe us?'.[18] As Ruth Krall comments,

> Assured by each church official in attendance that the women were indeed believed and their stories trusted, this meeting was a denominational watershed in the church's management of Yoder. For the first time a small subgroup of Yoder's victims and their allegations were denominationally validated as being factually truthful. For the first time victim stories were individually and collectively acknowledged and promises of meaningful action were made.[19]

The habit of not taking women seriously, of not giving credence to what they say, or their ability to know for themselves, has a long history.[20] In view of this, even the title of a recent novel by Miriam Toews, which was made into a film in 2022, is subversive. Her book is called *Women Talking*.[21] (It must be said that the book is based on a highly disturbing premise, about which anyone who engages with it should be aware.) *Women Talking* focuses on a group of Mennonite women who have been given an ultimatum by the bishop of their colony. The book focuses on two days of conversations the women have during which they wrestle with how they should respond to what has been put before them. Eight men from the colony are currently in civil authority jail on charges relating to sexual violence against the women. Over recent years, nearly all the women and girls of the colony had been drugged and raped by these eight men, who had finally been handed over to civil authorities

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17 Listed in Goossen, '"Defanging the Beast"', p. 14. As Elizabeth Phillips summarises, 'Yoder's "submission" to the disciplinary process was grudging, resistant, obfuscating, and defensive.' Elizabeth Phillips, 'Anabaptist Political Theologies' in *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. by William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott Wiley (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), pp. 332–345 (p. 342).

18 See Goossen, '"Defanging the Beast"', pp. 56–57, and Carolyn Holderread Heggen, 'Misconceptions and Victim Blaming', *The Mennonite*, August 2014, <https://archive.org/details/mennonite201417unse/page/n441/mode/1up> [accessed 3 November 2025].

19 Krall, *Elephants*, p. 73.

20 So, while I find Karen Guth's framework of tainted legacies as a moral problem enormously helpful, I also want to remain mindful of the gendered dimensions involved when it comes to the deeper structural injustices involved in sexual violence against women.

21 Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Faber & Faber, 2018).

after attacks on the perpetrators from within the colony. During these two days of conversation, most of the remaining men are absent, having gone to secure bail for those charged, to bring them back to the community while awaiting trial. When they return the women will be given the opportunity to forgive the men who attacked them in order to ensure that the men and the women themselves will be sure of their places in heaven. Should the women not forgive the men, the women are to be cast out of the colony, and thereby forfeit their entry through the gates of heaven.

In case this sounds like a salacious and misogynistic film industry-conceived concept, the book *Women Talking* was written, according to Miriam Toews, as 'a reaction through fiction' to actual events that occurred in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia between 2005 and 2009. Many girls and women in the Manitoba Colony would wake up in the morning in pain and feeling drowsy, with bruised and bleeding bodies, having been attacked in the night. At first put down to a mixture of demonic activity, punishment from either God or Satan for their sins, or lying for attention-seeking or to cover up adultery, eventually the truth emerged — that eight men from the colony were responsible, using animal anaesthetic to render their victims unconscious before raping them.[22] In contrast to the girls' and women's accounts of what had happened to them initially being attributed (by the elders and some other men of the colony) to 'wild female imagination', Miriam Toews who herself grew up in a small Mennonite town in Canada, describes her book as an 'act of female imagination'[23] in response.

In the book, as part of the imagined conversation in deciding how they should respond to the ultimatum they have been given — to forgive their rapists or be denied heaven — the women, who are illiterate, discuss the Bible and what it may say about what they should do.

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[22] Toews, 'A Note on the Novel', *Women Talking,* Kindle edition, location 15. See also Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, 'The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia', *Vice*, 20.8 (2013) <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w7gqj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8> [accessed 23 February 2023].
[23] Toews, 'A Note on the Novel', location 15.

> We can't read, says Salome, so how are we to know what is in the Bible?
>
> You are being difficult, says Mejal. We have been told what is in the Bible.
>
> Yes, says Salome, by Peters [who is the bishop] and the elders and by our husbands.
>
> Right, says Mejal. And by our sons.
>
> Our sons! says Salome. And what is the common denominator linking Peters and the elders and our sons and husbands? […] They are all men! […]
>
> Of course, says Mejal, I know that much. But who else would interpret the Bible for us?[24]

Later in the conversation, Salome encapsulates the difficulty the women have in determining how the Bible speaks into their situation: 'The issue […] is the male interpretation of the Bible and how that is "handed down" to us.'[25]

This male interpretation of all things about God and how such is handed down are at the heart of why women doing theology matters, and not only when dealing with sexual violence against women. For whenever women do theology themselves, they break the dominant trend of centuries of men telling women who God is and what God expects of them — or rather more accurately, the dominant trend of centuries of a patriarchal agenda that keeps women subordinate to men. Specifically with respect to sexual violence, the disbelieving of women's stories of abuse, the tendency to victim-blame women as sexually provocative creatures, and the strategies women have to put in place to negotiate their own safety in going about their daily lives[26] are all part of a patriarchalism, with a long history of theological justification, that denies women's moral agency, sexualises women's personhood, and assumes public space as male territory to which women must adapt. However, the significance of women doing theology is not only for the content of their theological contribution, which may or may not be focused on gender concerns. Rather, I suggest that the very act of their theologising witnesses to women as moral agents, as persons created in the image of God, with the capacity to reflect on divine–human

[24] Toews, *Women Talking*, Kindle edition, pp. 156–157.
[25] Toews, *Women Talking*, Kindle edition, p. 158.
[26] See Laura Bates, *Everyday Sexism* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

encounters and interpret divine disclosure. In saying all this, it seems I am making an argument for why women doing theology matters for women, but thinking of the particularity of theology that is feminist is where I start in making the case for why women doing theology matters for everyone.

Revisiting Women's Experience and Difference

So, why does women doing theology matter for everyone? I start with the recognition that each one of us imagines and understands God — that is, theologises — from within a context. As material beings, we are all located in cultural space somewhere, unable to separate from the myriad influences that have formed us and now make up our lives. This is true also for our faith: there is no neutral space from which we learn of God, and we do not follow Jesus in a cultural vacuum. Our different locations mean we bring different awareness, concerns, and questions to our theologising. When it comes to women, our different location[27] within gender power relations brings that experience to our questions about God, the world, and ourselves. In saying this, I have introduced two of the most demanding and contentious notions within feminist discourse, and which are often sites of confusion in Christian theologising, namely, 'difference' and 'women's experience', so I will clarify how I am using these terms.

In talking of 'women's experience', I am using the phrase in a particular way. Akin to other theologies of liberation, 'experience' refers to the lived experience of oppression — of injustice, inequality, discrimination, and/or disadvantage — embedded in our social, political and, for feminists, personal[28] relations and frameworks. 'Women's experience', therefore, is an analytical category that focuses on women's structurally subordinate position within society and, for the purposes of

[27] Arguably 'locations' in the plural when taking intersectionality into account.

[28] The phrase 'the personal is political' refers to the understanding that, contrary to dominant opinion, women's lived experience is not irrelevant to wider discussions about how society functions, what is valued, and the practices of public institutions (be they economic, political, or academic); that male dominance in both public and private domains is mutually reinforcing of women's subordination.

this article, within theology.[29] By structurally subordinate I am talking about the inequalities within gender power relations that tend to disadvantage women, and which have shaped not only social relations and philosophical frameworks, but religious communities and theological enquiry. This gender hierarchy is about how we think, behave, and organise. It has kept women out of religious leadership and theological endeavour and relegated femaleness within theology itself. And it has done so on theological grounds, which have been used to support two mutually endorsing notions: one is of maleness as normative humanity — which is the idea that the male and maleness most fully represent human existence and experience; the other is a gender dualism that not only conceives of gender in binary terms (men are this, women are that), but comes with a value system that prizes so called male or masculine attributes more than it does those associated with women. These mutually reinforcing notions have long been resistant to theological ideas that challenge male dominance in gender relations and they have also exhibited a disinterest in, or denial of, matters that are part of women's lives being sites of theological reflection. It is part of the particularity of theology that is feminist to persist in both these endeavours, and this involves consideration of difference, including pointing out the difference that women's theologising brings.

Talk of difference is fraught with difficulty because it has a long history of being weaponised against women. When you combine a presumption of male normativity with gender dualism, gender difference is not about how women and men may differ from each other, but how women differ from men. 'Difference' is something belonging to femaleness; women are the 'other'. Women's supposed difference from the norm has been used as a reason to exclude, marginalise, discriminate against, render inferior, or consider

[29] As an analytical category, it is not simply a collection of individual experiences — not simply my story and your story — but rather a way of understanding such lived realities that identify the harm done to women by patriarchal structures and mindsets. As Dorothee Soelle has said, 'Feminist theology arises, as does every liberation theology, from the experience of being wounded.' Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Sceptics* (Mowbray, 1993), p. 39. Such wounds are often made visible through the telling of a particular story, and as such illuminate the impact of structural subordination.

inadequate. Any consideration of difference, therefore, needs to be mindful of its history and continued use as a tool deployed against women's full and equal human personhood. At the same time, when not so weaponised, women's different experience within gender power relations can bring a distinctive contribution to both theology and practice. Without advocating essentialism, women may 'see or do things differently' because of the particularity of female embodiment and because of socially constructed gender experience, the latter always mediating the former. This contribution to theologising has been valued by many women, and not only by women, but what is not so often appreciated within theology more broadly is how theology that is feminist highlights the partiality of much mainstream theology. I suggest we see this dynamic clearly in criticisms that are made of theological ideas that emerge from women's lives, criticisms which I have come to think of as a theological equivalent to magicians' misdirection.

Theological Misdirection

Magicians use what is often termed misdirection to absorb an audience's attention in one place, so that actions making the illusion work somewhere else go unnoticed. Indeed, the art of the illusionist is that as an audience we think where we are watching is all there is to see, and we miss the significance of what is happening away from our focus. The analogy to theology is limited, but my point is that criticisms of theology that is feminist detract attention from critiques such theology is making of established theology that does not emerge from feminist sensibilities.

So, for example, when we think of using female metaphors and pronouns for deity — for any number of reasons, from affirming women's divinely created human personhood in the image of God to expanding our understanding of the divine beyond the confines of one gender — and the objection is made that this is an attempt to turn God into a woman or make God female, this argument misses the point that female metaphors and pronouns for deity are declarations that God is not a man or male. This needs saying, for, in the words of Elizabeth Johnson,

> While officially it is rightly and consistently said that God is spirit and so beyond identification with either male or female sex, yet the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female.[30]

The ubiquitous theological practice of privileging male references for God and the accompanying opposition to the inclusion of female ones, even their occasional use (even though this latter only serves to underscore how much an aberration from the norm this is), imprints in personal and community understanding an association of God with maleness and, at the same time, a disassociation of God from femaleness. Why does this matter? Because as succinctly put by Mary Daly in 1973, 'If God is male, then the male is God.'[31] Exclusive or dominant male imagery for God perpetuates inequality between women and men and specifically male dominance over women.

In this context of the overwhelming dominance of male imagery and language for the divine in Christian communities, what theology that draws on female metaphors points to, but is often lost from our view, is the necessary reminder that male language for God, while legitimate, does not mean God is male and this has implications for social relations. Indeed, it may be that, because gender dualism is so prominent as an interpretive lens through which we come to our understanding of God, we miss much meaning embedded in male metaphorical language. I wonder, for example, what it would be like if, when we come together to say the prayer that Jesus taught the disciples and which starts with 'Our Father', we introduced it with the reminder that God as Father was a metaphor of belonging based not on social status or human family connections, or on privilege, power, and patronage, but on relationship to the Creator, freely offered to all with the invitation to become disciples and friends. Analogous to, yet as with all analogies differentiated from, the figure of the senior male person in first century households, this metaphor expressed a truth that confounded first century social mores of respectability and social order,

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[30] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 1997), pp. 4–5.
[31] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Women's Press, 1986), p. 19.

and of male power. For, to belong to a new community in God, rather than identifying with family, religious, political, or national allegiances, was disturbing to the existing social and indeed sacral order. As I have argued elsewhere, the image of God as father was a direct challenge to the place of all patriarchs, whether in kin networks, households, or as heads of states. Its significance is not as a male as opposed to female metaphor, but as a picture that confounds systems of domination.[32] This is not to say that other interpretations of the metaphor are not available. But there needs to be room for this conversation in theology, not simply in theology that is feminist. The theology women do matters for everyone because it has implications for everyone's theology.

What the particularity of theology that is feminist does in bringing this contribution to theology is highlight the partiality of all theological endeavour. Theology rooted in women's embodied (both physical and social) experience exposes how dominant theological traditions have been generated, interpreted, and perpetuated by male theologians who inhabit the social location of their gender, where male is both norm and frequently inherently privileged in gender power relations. Such partiality limits theological imagination for everyone, particularly that which resonates with the lives of women, but it also works against attention being given to the harms the status quo does to women.

Anabaptist Theology

Anabaptist theology comes under this critique. The androcentric nature of Anabaptist theology was highlighted by feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theological writers in the *MCC Women's Concerns Report* (published 1972–2004). As Carol Penner has pointed out, these writers portrayed Jesus as good news for women and other groups on the margins of power, a Jesus who was 'remarkably different from the Jesus presented by male Anabaptist writers, who often emphasized a servant Jesus who called others to suffer', thereby revealing 'Anabaptist

[32] Fran Porter, *Women and Men After Christendom: The Dis-Ordering of Gender Relationships* (Paternoster, 2015), pp. 20–22.

theology' as 'male Anabaptist theology'.[33] For the call to give up privilege and power made sense from the stance of the advantages of male social location, in contrast to women who, from their lived experience of a relative lack of power, resonated with Jesus's message of liberation.

Anabaptist theology has also been wanting in contexts of violence against women. Succinctly put in a comment made in the context of a 1991 Mennonite conference on peace theology and violence against women, 'Since most peace theology has been articulated by men, women's experience of violence has not been adequately addressed.'[34] As Stephanie Krehbiel comments, 'Mennonite pacifist discourse evolved as a response to the dominant ideal of warrior masculinity, a way for men to justify not going to war: it has never been as fully formed or celebrated for its challenge to interpersonal violence.'[35]

To address violence against women, however, has far-reaching theological implications: for christologies of a suffering Christ, which are misapplied to abused women; for the focus on the primacy of restoration of offenders in reconciliation processes based on Matthew 18 and which ignore systemic power differences; and for the ecclesiological understanding of church as the new community, with its pressures to perform as an alternative to surrounding society, hindering the opportunity for Christian communities to discern the work of God happening outside of themselves. Referring to Mennonite and Brethren churches, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite states,

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[33] The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a North American Anabaptist service organisation involved in relief, development, and peacebuilding. The *Report* was an initiative that focused on women's concerns around peacebuilding. Always edited by women, 171 issues of the *Report* were produced, containing theological articles written from white (Feminist), Black (womanist), and Latin (*mujerista*) women's social locations. See Carol Penner, 'Jesus and the Stories of Our Lives', in *Liberating the Politics of Jesus*, ed. by Albrecht and Stephens, pp. 33–52, (pp. 46, 47).

[34] 'Listeners Report from the Consultation' in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, ed. by Elizabeth G. Yoder, Vol. 16, Occasional Papers (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), pp. 119–121, (p. 119).

[35] Stephanie Krehbiel, 'The Woody Allen Problem: How do We Read Pacificist Theologian (and Sexual Abuser) John Howard Yoder?', *Religion Dispatches*, 11 February 2014, <https://religiondispatches.org/the-woody-allen-problem-how-do-we-read-pacifist-theologian-and-sexual-abuser-john-howard-yoder/> [accessed 8 June 2022].

> Sectarian Pacifism needs to be confronted directly on their theology of obedience (and especially the submission of women), following the example of the sacrificial love of Christ (especially imposed on women to model Christ's suffering), as well as the pressures to be the self-righteous, "good" community against the evil world.[36]

She writes that the case of sexual misconduct charges against JHY 'is a prime example of how these theological perspectives can coconspire to facilitate violence against women and prevent an appropriate institutional response.'[37] Further, she argues,

> It is crucial […] to recognize that Yoder's sexual misconduct toward so many women is not something that should be treated as just a personal flaw and be separated from his pacifist views. Pacifism needs to examine its own deep inheritance in misogyny and to change not only by including women more in its authority structures but in its theological and biblical approaches as well.[38]

So, women doing theology matters for everyone because theology that is feminist is part of the human endeavour to grasp something of God and has implications for all theological work. Put simply, all theology is theology, and that is why I choose here to talk not of feminist theology but of theology that is feminist, by which I mean theology that rather than overlooking, marginalising, silencing or denigrating women, whether by intention or through obliviousness, instead affirms and witnesses to women's full human personhood as those made in the image of God. My argument is that, in part, the way such theology does this is by illuminating the partiality of much theology considered to be universal, but which obscures or denies its contextual origins. All theology is rooted in cultural contexts somewhere and what theology that is feminist can do is expose where the embodied male advantage inherent in unequal gender power relations has shaped much of the theological status quo.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that, in the abstract or as a matter of normative method, theology that is feminist should be the criteria by which other theological contributions are assessed (though

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[36] Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 48.
[37] Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, p. 157.
[38] Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, p. 157.

that would certainly be appropriate in specific instances, not least with what we are dealing with here). Nor am I suggesting that theology that is feminist should simply be accepted without scrutiny, any more than any other theology should be (although arguably, theology that is feminist often has not been treated just like any other theology but rather viewed either as suspicious or as frivolous, because of its female authorship). What I am saying is that theology that is feminist speaks to all theological endeavour not just as an added or more often optional perspective, but as a contribution that has its place as part of a core conversation, ensuring that women's realities and their theological contributions are involved in shaping the theology produced, correcting the default of androcentric bias.

I would make a similar argument about theology that emerges from other embodied human experiences that are denied in, or excluded from, established theological accounts. To argue this, of course, presents us with an impossible task. The scope of theological endeavour in our own corner of the world, let alone around the globe, is overwhelming. The very awareness that this is the case in itself can tell us much about our own situatedness and associated partiality, yet we cannot possibly engage with the abundance of theological imagination potentially available to us. I would contend, however, that, at certain times and places, because of situations we find ourselves in, theology from particular locations calls for our attention — if we can only hear it. And the tainted legacies of Anabaptist theology with which we are currently confronted because of sexual violence against women, justified on theological grounds, but undergirded by centuries of patriarchal cultures and structures, are just such a time and place where it is women doing theology in particular who must be heard. Karen Guth puts it this way:

> While a wide range of Christian reflection will be helpful in engaging tainted legacies, feminist and womanist theologians are among the particularly well situated, having spent decades reckoning with Christianity itself as one of the most influential tainted legacies in human history. Feminist concern for the

> ways sexism corrupts Christian texts, doctrines, and practice, along with womanist analysis of the ways sexism intersects with racism, classism, and other oppressions to harm black women and the whole community, is critical to our inquiry here.[39]

In citing this, I am not suggesting that it is only women who should be doing this theology, but rather that their theological voices must be included, and at times lead, in shaping *everyone's* theology in the context of sexual violence against women.

Response

To conclude, theology implicated in violence is not new. That theology and theologians known for advocacy of non-violence and peace-making should perpetrate and/or fail to prevent sexual violence, not only in this prominent situation but also in many others whether conspicuous or not, is injurious not only to women harmed directly, but also to all those, whether individually or corporately, whose capacity to trust has been undermined and confidence in Christian faith wounded. This speaks to the integrity of Anabaptist theology. I talk of integrity not reputation to emphasise that it is not about the self-concern of preserving what we look like in the eyes of others, of protecting the standing of church and academy, all of which have deflected from responding to the harms done. Rather, integrity is about the substance of who we are, even when no-one is looking. There is both deficit and distortion in Anabaptist theology when it comes to the wellbeing of women. How those of us who engage with this theology now respond, indeed that we do respond, is a matter of integrity for Anabaptist theology.

[39] Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 22.

Reconceiving Success: Mission as Faithful Witness

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Abstract
Explorations of success criteria for church-based missions are abundant, but they are not always helpful in supporting the well-being of practitioners. This article argues for abandoning success criteria in missions and instead viewing missions as a practice of faithful witness. Using David Bosch's critiques of the evangelical and ecumenical models for missions, the discussion explores faithfulness as prophetic dialogue and witness as an eschatological concept to develop a more supportive approach to local church missions.

Keywords
David Bosch; mission; success criteria; faithful witness

Introduction: Missions and Success

Does it matter if mission is successful? In my experience mission and success do not make easy bedfellows. I have wrestled with the question for nearly fifteen years since being involved in several missional roles/organisations and latterly in academic reflection. Most people will acknowledge that mission is not just 'people in the pews' or the three 'Bs' — 'bodies, budget, and buildings' as Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer put it — but, from my experience, parameters for missional success include, amongst others, spiritual formation, discipleship, transformation, or opportunities for presenting Jesus to an unchurched society.[1] While this is a step in the right direction, there is still a focus on the outcome of missions being successful. Gil Rendle argues that there is a difference between *counting* and *measuring*, but still concludes that measuring is important to track outcomes.[2] However, I suggest that

[1] Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (B&H Publishing, 2010), p. 26.
[2] Gil Rendle, *Doing the Maths of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 16.

neither counting success nor measuring outcomes are helpful for missional practice.[3] Developing missional practice should not be about redefining the outcome to measure but recognising that any sort of measure is inherently counterproductive for the faithful witness to God's kingdom. Instead, missional practitioners should *discern* what *God is doing* rather than *measure* what *they are doing*. By revisiting David Bosch's *missio Dei* in *Transforming Mission* and more so his analysis of the evangelical and ecumenical models of mission in *Witness to the World*, I argue that conceiving of missions as faithful witness avoids the unhelpful suppositions inherent in both models, bringing clarity to the question of measuring success in missional practice.

The Mission of God and Faithful Witness

Bosch's *Transforming Mission* remains a seminal work in mission studies particularly for its emphasis on the *missio Dei*. Bosch traces the idea back to the 1930s and the Barthian influence that understands mission 'as an activity of God himself'.[4] There is one mission of God through which all other missions of the church are 'derivative'.[5] Significantly, Bosch suggests this means the primary objective of church-based missions

> can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to service the *missio Dei*, representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God, holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany.[6]

In short, church-based missions should *point* to God, *represent* God, *hold up* Christ before those who do not yet know him. From this perspective a good umbrella term for missions is *faithful witness*.

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[3] 'Missions' is too broad a term to be useful in most cases when it can encompass world Christianity, colonialism, contextualisation, and so on. As indicated by locating myself in the conversation, I am primarily thinking about intracultural mission in the West through the activities of local churches and organisations. While some of the conclusions may be instructive for wider conversations, I suspect the approach and experiences would differ.

[4] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 389.

[5] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

[6] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 391.

As Bosch notes, this approach is a return to the centrality of the trinitarian nature of God.[7] Viewing the *missio Dei* as the sending of the Son and Spirit alone, however, can result in a kind of open-endedness which detrimentally lends itself to measures of success. Bosch primarily emphasises the sending movements of the persons, but the soteriological nature of the Trinity must also include their return.[8] The Son proceeds from the Father only to be reconciled to the Father through the resurrection and ascension, inaugurating a recapitulation of human nature. The Spirit spirates from the Father, and in a continuous, dynamic movement, dwells within Christians so that they might participate in Christ's reconciliation of humanity to the Father. The persons of the Trinity are never sent without an inevitable return. Thus, the mission of God is not found in sending alone, but also the return of the persons, gathering with them all who are indwelled by the Spirit and reconciled to the Father through the Son.

To build upon Bosch, it is not only that 'to participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people', but it is also to participate in the reconciliation accomplished by the return of the Son and Spirit to the Father.[9] I suggest, therefore, that the mission of God can be summed up in the following: 'To reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.'[10] This approach places the emphasis of the *missio Dei* on the story of reconciliation not only on the 'sent-ness' of the triune persons. By extension, the emphasis of the *missiones ecclesiarum* (i.e. church-based missions or, in this discussion, missions for short) is not on the sending activity, but rather

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[7] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

[8] I acknowledge that the return may be implicit in some understandings of 'sent-ness', but here I want to make it explicit in order to emphasise the already completed *missio Dei*. In doing so, I follow St. Thomas Aquinas's idea of *exitus* and *reditus* where 'the eternal processions of the Son and Holy Spirit are the path of our return to the Father'. Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 13. Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences* I. d. 14, qu. 2, ans. 2, especially the idea of the circle or return — 'For just as we have also been constituted through the Son and the Holy Spirit, through them too we are joined to the ultimate end.'

[9] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

[10] Colossians 1:20 (NIV) — the verse continues 'by making peace through his blood shed on the cross'. Again, it is not just the 'sent-ness' (or incarnation) of the Son that is determinative, but the act of reconciliation through the Son's death, resurrection, and ascension.

the faithful witness to the reconciliation of all things, which God has already achieved through Christ. Focusing only on 'sent-ness' leaves the purpose of the *missio Dei* open-ended, while the return emphasises the story of reconciliation. Detrimentally, the open-endedness, when extended to church-based missions, gives rise to two problems explored below: first, the mistaken belief that humans are tasked with completing the *missio Dei* (the core criticism of the ecumenical model); and second, the mistaken belief that we can measure the progress towards completion (the core criticism of the evangelical model).

Evangelical and Ecumenical Models of Mission

Bosch's earlier work, *Witness to the World*, critiques two common models of church-based missions — the first he names the *evangelical* model and the second, the *ecumenical* model. The evangelical model is rooted in an 'other-worldliness' which considers the present creation to be 'temporary' and therefore 'unimportant'.[11] Christians in this model separate from the world and focus on saving souls, 'without having to introduce any changes in their pattern of life as regards social involvement'.[12] Bosch's criticism of the evangelical model is nuanced and profound. He rejects the proposal that conservative churches are experiencing growth because of their fundamentalism, instead arguing that 'despite their spine-chilling sermons about sin, Satan and hell [they] do not constitute any real threat to their listeners' life-style'.[13] In short, the message might sound harsh, but it is less challenging to a comfortable life-style than the hard work of battling social injustice.

Bosch's second critique of the evangelical model is the 'almost fanatical clinging to existing structures and patterns of life'.[14] Bosch argues that 'the more the gospel is proclaimed as an other-worldly reality, the more the existing order is uncritically upheld'.[15] In short, the

[11] David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Wipf & Stock, 2006), p. 207.
[12] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.
[13] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.
[14] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.
[15] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.

evangelical model not only maintains the status quo but paradoxically promotes collusion with cultural norms. The evangelical model becomes a 'victim of the capitalistic mentality' so 'church and missionary society are run like secular organisations'.[16] Bosch concludes that the capitalistic mentality remains a subtle but dominant driving force behind missions such that 'success must be demonstrable' through an 'emphasis on growth in numbers'.[17]

On the other hand, the ecumenical model argues for a continuation of God's salvation through a liberation of creation and an on-going redemption. Bosch carefully distinguishes liberation theology from classical liberalism where the latter was 'gradual improvement' while the former was revolution not evolution.[18] Whether agreeing with Bosch's assessment of these two theological approaches or not, significantly there is a convergence between the two models. Both see the world as corrupted and change can only come about by discontinuity — for the evangelical model, by God's revelation and for the ecumenical model by human revolution. The main emphasis in the ecumenical model, therefore, is that humans are the architects of their own future.

Bosch criticises the ecumenical model for equating salvation with socio-political liberation: 'Evangelisation is absorbed into political action; salvation is social justice.'[19] For Bosch, this leads to a new Christendom where society is synonymous with the kingdom of God and becomes a 'variation of the old heresy which locates the Kingdom either in the Church or in [human hearts]'.[20] Furthermore, taken to the logical conclusion, this approach diminishes the church until 'the Church becomes entirely a part of the world, indistinguishable from any other element in it'.[21]

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16 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 208.
17 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 208.
18 Due to the revolutionary nature of change, Bosch suggests 'liberation theology is therefore a form of apocalypticism'. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, pp. 213–214.
19 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 215.
20 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 216.
21 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 217.

Despite these two models being at opposite ends of the spectrum, they both suffer from a misappropriation of the relationship between church and world. For the evangelical model, the other-worldly focus leads to an uncritical appropriation of cultural norms; for the ecumenical model, the this-worldly focus dissolves church into world.[22] Bosch advocates an 'essential difference' between church and world so that 'in her prayer the Church vicariously does for the world what the world neither does nor can do for itself'.[23] While Bosch develops his response in one direction, the following discussion suggests that conceiving of missions as *faithful witness* navigates the problems raised by Bosch's analysis, particularly when applied to measuring success in missional practice.[24]

Responding to the Evangelical Model: Faithfulness and Prophetic Dialogue

Considering the prophetic as an act of faithful witness can counter the evangelical model's captivity to the 'capitalistic mentality' and thus its propensity to measure success in numbers. Prophecy is used in many ways from foretelling to forthtelling, from mystical proclamation to tangible transformation; however, a straightforward definition is simply the faithful witness to God's mission.[25] Using the prophetic to consider church-based missions, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, citing Baziou, note a change in missions from 'expansion' to 'encounter' and

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[22] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 224.

[23] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 219.

[24] Like the proposal here, Bosch considers the 'most adequate formulation' for mission uses the umbrella term 'witness'; however, Bosch subdivides this into proclamation, fellowship, and service. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 227. This leads Bosch to develop a response in a particular way that while not contradictory, does not answer the questions of missional practice as discussed here.

[25] For example, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines a prophet as one who 'characteristically speaks for God as a messenger speaks for his master'. R. W. L. Moberly, 'Prophecy', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology,* ed. by Ian A. McFarland, D. Fergusson, K. Kilby, and I. Torrance (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 413–414. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* puts it concisely as 'an immediate communication of God's (Christ's) word to his people through human lips' and translates *nābî* as one who witnesses or testifies. A. Lamorte and D. F. Hawthorne, 'Prophecy, Prophet', in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edn, ed. by Walter A Elwell (Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 960–962.

propose prophetic dialogue as a helpful approach to navigate this change.[26] Dialogue balances bold proclamation (*expansion*) with respectful listening (*encounter*), while the prophetic recognises that 'in its annunciation of the gospel, the church must be equally passionate about its denunciation of injustice and evil'.[27] Unlike the evangelical model with its other-worldly ignorance, prophetic dialogue has no uncritical embrace of the present order. Bevans and Schroeder recognise that 'Christian life goes against the grain', describing mission as *countercultural* (although not *anticultural*).[28] Citing three examples — Gerhard Lohfink, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Craig Van Gelder — Bevans and Schroeder understand that churches should be a 'contrast society', 'resident aliens', or 'demonstration plots' where 'being the church […] is a prophetic act'.[29]

But how does the prophetic relate to measures of success? Insightfully, Bevans and Schroeder use Jeremiah to show that prophetic 'action was hardly popular with the king or with the people in general'.[30] This is illustrative of a wider concept where a prophet faithfully witnesses to God's will 'in season, out of season, despite opposition, derision, and persecution'.[31] Similarly Ezekiel is told to proclaim God's words 'whether they listen or fail to listen'.[32] Leslie Allen notes 'the response of the recipients to the message of their sovereign (אדני Lord) is strikingly described as *immaterial*, whether acceptance of the message or — more likely in view of their sinful nature — rejection.'[33] One of the key aspects of prophetic action is the faithful witness to God's mission regardless of the reception. Hauerwas and Willimon advocate that Christians live in a way which is 'alien' to the rest of the world, where 'what makes sense to everybody else is revealed to be opposed to

[26] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Orbis Books, 2011), p. 19.
[27] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 19.
[28] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 34.
[29] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 35.
[30] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 31.
[31] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 31.
[32] Ezekiel 2:7 (NIV).
[33] Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary 28: Ezekiel 1–19* (Word Books, 1994), p. 39 (emphasis mine).

what God is doing among us'.[34] They follow this up with an impactful soundbite: 'Jesus was not crucified for saying or doing what made sense to everyone.'[35] In other words, faithful witness is the opposite to measured success.

Rather than the capitalistic mentality that requires success to be evidenced, faithful witness should be the key motivation in missional practice. Instead of fruitfulness or growth being success criteria measured by a defined outcome, the goal of church-based missions is to faithfully witness to the *missio Dei* regardless of the outcome.

Responding to the Ecumenical Model: Witness and Eschatology

When it comes to the ecumenical model, faithful witness counters two interrelated concerns. First, that the *missio Dei* too easily becomes anthropocentric, that is, humans try to accomplish the mission of God themselves; and second, that church-based missions too easily slip into thinking the work of Christ is yet to be completed. The first of these concerns is highlighted in many missional models that claim to be incarnational. David Hesselgrave argues that incarnationalism too quickly claims continuity between Christ's ministry and the life of churches today, while his preferred model is representationalism, which emphasises the discontinuity.[36] Furthermore, this type of incarnationalism leads to missions where individuals and churches continue the salvific work of Christ themselves as if Christ's work remains unfinished.[37]

In contrast, representationalism leads to missions where individuals and churches witness to Christ's work as ambassadors who are the beneficiaries of Christ's finished work on the cross. Moreover, Andreas Kostenberger's critique of John Stott's incarnational model is an insightful reminder of the uniqueness of the *missio Dei*. Kostenberger

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[34] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 74.
[35] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 74.
[36] David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Kregel Publications, 2005), p. 141.
[37] Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, p. 152.

rejects the incarnational model as 'jeopardizing' the salvific and divine nature of Christ's incarnation upholding 'Jesus's incarnation as thoroughly unique, unprecedented, and unrepeatable'.[38] Once again, Kostenberger and Hesselgrave's critique of incarnationalism mirrors Bosch's observation that the ecumenical model is 'impatient with a God who "is a long time coming"', and 'takes matters into [their] own hands and tries to build the future with [their] own means'.[39] Rather than mimicking the act of salvation or worse, entertaining the idea that we are responsible for completing God's kingdom, church-based missions should be no more than, but certainly no less than, the faithful witness to the one saviour, Jesus Christ and the kingdom that God has established.

The second related concern is that church-based missions too easily become about progress towards a perfect world, thus suggesting that the *missio Dei* is incomplete and necessitates human completion. With Augustine's eschatology in view, R. A. Markus observes that 'no social arrangements, no human justice or ingenuity, could establish the Kingdom of God or bring us any closer to it; only God's saving acts could do that'.[40] This is, according to Luke Bretherton, because Augustine's eschatology resists triumphalism ('marked by an expectation of progress until the church would overcome the world') and separatism (caused by the belief that 'history is oriented toward regress or a movement away from God').[41] The present situation, therefore, 'neither promises nor sets at risk the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is established, if not fully manifest, and the "end" of history is already achieved and fulfilled in Christ.'[42] Church-based missions, therefore, *should not* be about establishing the kingdom of God, but rather, *should* be about witnessing to the kingdom of God already established and the potentiality of reconciliation inaugurated by Christ. Christian witness to the kingdom of God may render the kingdom more

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[38] Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 216.
[39] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 216.
[40] R. A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 55.
[41] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 82.
[42] Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, p. 82.

clearly visible to the world around us and it may release reconciliatory potential by inviting others into the kingdom, but our missional endeavours do not institute or ultimately complete the kingdom. Whatever the result of faithful witness, it does not impinge upon the inevitability of God's kingdom.

Faithful witness, therefore, becomes a key motif for church-based missions to resist the temptation to control or complete the *missio Dei* and emphasises the role of Christians to point towards God and Christ's completed work on the cross. Built upon Bosch's critique of the ecumenical model, missions as faithful witness changes the goal of missions from that which humans can establish to that which God has already established.

'Successful' Mission as Cultural Collusion

Considering faithful witness as a response to the problems of both the evangelical and ecumenical models can also point towards a response to measuring success in missional practice. If church-based missions consider outcomes to be 'immaterial' and do not try to control the *missio Dei*, they will be in contrast to many missional movements in the contemporary church. While sometimes with good motives, the reality is that much missional practice is subtly (and often unconsciously) linked to the capitalistic mentality where growth is evidence of success. Even the best-intentioned talk of fruitfulness/spiritual maturity remains symptomatic of modern liberalism's obsession with human development and progress.

Martyn Percy critiques the Fresh Expressions movement as being influenced by the 'contemporary cultural obsession with newness, alternatives and novelty'.[43] Andy Crouch also observes that churches often fall prey to cultural phenomena, be that modernity's 'pretensions

[43] Martyn Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs? A Critique of Fresh Expressions', in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, ed. by Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 27–39 (p. 29).

of control' or postmodernity's 'disillusionment with […] institutions'.[44] Like Percy, Crouch decries churches' 'addiction to novelty' and argues that the sacraments' post-individualist and post-consumerist approach should 'offer us a chance to detoxify from (post)modernity's clamour of newness'.[45] According to Percy, new forms of church arise out of post-institutionalism rather than a genuine recovery of a missiological tradition and therefore 'religion and faith have become consumable commodities'.[46] On the surface novelty is appealing, but Percy argues it is a shallow façade or 'simulation' underwritten by the mistaken belief that 'in-dwelling the novel will somehow take us somewhere different, and better — it is a pure but subtle form of consumerism'.[47] The implication is undoubtedly clear — this kind of collusion with capitalist consumerism takes the need for control from the ecumenical model and marries it with the need for evidenced success from the evangelistic model. As such, any mission that colludes with capitalist consumerism is diametrically opposite to the approach of faithful witness where the response to missional activity is immaterial while maintaining a critical distance from context.

Kester Brewin critiques transactional methods of church-based missions. As Percy above, Brewin suggests that much missional activity is commodified because it is driven by what is received in response to what is given — a market exchange.[48] Church-based missions motivated

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[44] Andy Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. by Leonard Sweet (Zondervan, 2003), pp. 63–104 (p. 73, and p. 78).

[45] Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', pp. 87–88.

[46] Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs?', p. 30. Of course, this is not how those involved in Fresh Expressions think about it. Jonny Baker writes, 'We're not doing this to try and make church more attractive, we're doing it because it's what we're like. It's to try and express our Christianity in a way that is authentic.' Jonny Baker quoted by Maggi Dawn: 'You Have To Change To Stay the Same', in *The Post-Evangelical Debate*, by Graham Cray, Maggi Dawn, Nick Mercer, Michael Saward, Pete Ward, and Nigel Wright (Triangle, 1997), pp. 35–56 (p. 49). I suspect the best new forms of church tread a thin line between authenticity and cultural collusion recognising that what is 'authentic' is often culturally shaped. For example, Root suggests the pursuit of authenticity can negate the transcendent where 'spirituality, then, is bound to and even serves the immanent frame'. Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 11.

[47] Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs?', p. 34.

[48] See especially his evangelism programme illustration. Kester Brewin, *The Complex Christ: Signs of Emergence in the Urban Church* (SPCK, 2004), pp. 119–120.

by outcomes of any sort are inherently a commodification of the activity where churches/agencies expect a return on their investment (be that of money, time, energy, prayers, or social action). Crouch connects the obsession with novelty to commodification through equating new forms of church with a market niche, citing that 'this is akin to a small store seeking to serve customers that the national chains overlook'.[49] However, even this is 'participating in the same consumer economy' drawing comparisons to Starbucks making 'expensive coffee cool' and the independent stores that benefit from the phenomenon.[50]

In short, even the novel and alternative forms of church too often buy into consumerism by expecting a return on investment. In an extended quote Brewin warns,

> Thinking more widely about our cities, they are massively dominated by market exchange — economic beasts driven by capital and profit […] The Church would be foolish to try to play the city at this game and boost its 'market share', 'reposition itself in the market' or 'rebrand' its message with modern advertising and marketing methods, for the essence of what we have cannot be bought or sold. It is not to be consumed and is not a lifestyle choice.[51]

Under the guise of spiritual language, profit becomes new members; market share becomes church planting; capital becomes tithing or spiritual gifts. Even when wrapped up in biblical language and with good intentions, the capitalist consumerism driving mission validates the anthropocentric temptation to take control of the *missio Dei* to gain 'success' for individual, church, or organisation.

The Practice of Faithful Witness and Missions

So far, faithful witness has been defined by what it is not or what it avoids. It resists the anthropological desire to control the *missio Dei*; it avoids the capitalistic mentality that would measure success through outcomes or responses; and it resists an other-worldliness that hinders its ability to challenge injustice. Positively, approaching missions as

[49] Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', p. 76.
[50] Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', p. 76.
[51] Brewin, *Complex Christ*, pp. 126–127.

faithful witness broadens the scope of missions ensuring that it does not become passive spectating. Second, faithful witness uses discernment as the primary tool to enable churches to determine the *missio Dei* for their local context without being swayed by external pressures. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, faithful witness releases churches and church leaders from the unbearable capitalistic burden of success.

While the evangelical model shrinks the scope of missions to personal holiness, the ecumenical model reduces missions to an anthropocentric political agenda. Based upon the *missio Dei* as the reconciliation of all things, faithful witness recognises the breadth of missions, including a reconciled creation (encompassing the non-human) and resisting systemic injustice that perpetuates abusive patterns of behaviour. It is perhaps Jürgen Moltmann who best captures the fullness of reconciliation when he suggests that 'we should bow before the earth and beg for forgiveness for the injustice we have inflicted on it, so that we may once more be accepted into community with it'.[52] While the agency of creation to grant forgiveness is debatable, reconciliation is necessary across all planes — other humans, the wider created order, ourselves, and with God. Churches who embrace the call to faithful witness recognise the world is not as it should be and advocate for the world as it could be by seeking out the unreconciled places and becoming ambassadors for the ministry of reconciliation 'as though God were making His appeal through us'.[53] Therefore, witnessing is not passive spectating but active participation in revealing God's kingdom.[54]

To be a faithful witness is to be an ambassador who prepares the way for the sovereign; who advocates for the concerns of the

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[52] Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (SCM Press, 1997), p. 116.

[53] 2 Corinthians 5:20 (NIV).

[54] Witnessing in the normative sense of the word is to give testimony to an event or occurrence. This does not render Christians inactive bystanders. First, the act of witnessing is active and necessary ('how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' Romans 10:14 NIV). Second, I imagine a witness as an ambassador or emissary — one who represents another without being conflated with the other ('We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.' 2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV).

sovereign; and who represents the sovereign to their immediate context. Far from being a passive spectator, an ambassador is an active participant in representing the sovereign to the world (i.e., to repeat Bosch's words, 'holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany'). Faithful witness recognises church-based missions as derivative from the will of God and therefore not self-determined, which means that far from being reductive, the *missio Dei* is broad, far-reaching, and transforms every aspect of the created order.

In the same way that faithful witness can wrongly appear to be passive inactivity, it can also appear to be vague and lacking direction. While, on the one hand, providing a ten-step programme is not the aim, church-based missions as faithful witness should result in concrete and tangible action within a given context. The ecumenical model's tendency to conflate socio-political goals with church-based missions reduces its ability to discern the *missio Dei*; the evangelical model's success-driven approach limits church-based missions to only that which fulfils its success criteria. Faithful witness, however, relies on discernment to perceive the *missio Dei* within the local context.

Haley Barton describes discernment as 'an ever-increasing capacity to "see" or discern the works of God in the midst of the human situation so that we can align ourselves with whatever it is that God is doing'.[55] Significantly, discernment upsets the status quo by confronting us with what is beyond our normative experience.[56] She argues that discernment takes Christians beyond systems of thought that stifle their perception of God's will and helps to 'get outside our paradigms so that we can see old realities in new ways'.[57]

Ryan Newson describes discernment as a powerful 'counter-practice' which shapes Christian action in a society marked by 'moral incompetence'. For Newson, discernment is not 'quietistic in the face of injustice', but rather, 'Christians engaged in communal discernment are

[55] Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (IVP Books, 2012), p. 20.
[56] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p. 26.
[57] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p. 24.

being prepared – whether they realize it or not – to see that authentic and lasting change in the world comes not by quietistic inaction, but by boldly and lovingly confronting what needs confronting with gospel means.'[58]

Discernment done well implements a countercultural approach without it becoming anticultural. Faithful witness requires ecclesial communities to listen to God's *verbum externum* and, therefore, be critical of the surrounding context when necessary; but it also requires ecclesial communities to listen to the needs of the local context and respond in love. It is neither the other-worldly approach of the evangelical model that dismisses the value of the world; but it is not the uncritical approval of the ecumenical model. While a ten-step programme is the easy way to arrive at concrete actions, it would just create success criteria; however, the practice of discernment, while more effort and less prescriptive, will nevertheless lead to concrete and tangible action.

At the heart of this discussion is the question of successful missions and, in conclusion, I return to that theme. The simple conclusion is that church-based missions as faithful witness releases leaders and missional activity from the pressure of measuring success. Establishing communities of faithful witness recognises that God's sovereign grace is active in missional practice, not human achievement, and humans do not have control over God's sovereignty. On a pragmatic level, like the prophets called to speak regardless of the response, missions of faithful witness continue to act in ways God has called them, regardless of their success. By acting as faithful witnesses, leaders and practitioners are released from the responsibility of outcomes and results. Faithful witness is not anti-growth per se, but faithful witness breaks the link between measuring human achievement and the *missio Dei*.[59]

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[58] Ryan Andrew Newson, *Radical Friendship: The Politics of Communal Discernment* (Fortress Press, 2017), p. 157.

[59] There is a further aspect of faithful witness as a tool for the decolonisation of mission. Not only does it remove the pressure of success-based ministry, it also transforms knowledge. Instead of mission being about an exchange of ideas/knowledge (with the assumption that the Christian's knowledge is superior to the non-believer's), faithful witness is an open-ended presentation and representation of God's presence within creation. The invitation is to engage

Of course, much missional practice is reacting against the failure of churches to be successful — why would you keep doing the same thing when the church is diminishing? The easy answer is to restate the example of the faithful witness of the prophets; the more complex answer recognises that failure has also been defined by cultural norms in the same way as the success criteria. Furthermore, little of the promised growth has materialised from decades of missional practice based upon these criteria for success. Being wedded to the capitalistic mentality has caused churches to lose their relevancy within society to speak out on the issues that matter.

Aimed specifically against Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle, Bosch's strongest criticism is where the pursuit of success/growth has disfigured the gospel:

> If it should happen – for instance in the USA – that racial integration in a specific church causes a decline in church membership, he [McGavran] recommends racially segregated churches because, so he believes, it has been proved that such homogeneous churches grow more quickly than those with a heterogeneous composition.[60]

Bosch's pointed criticism on the corrupting effect of success criteria on the gospel should end the matter on success criteria for the missions of churches. In light of this criticism, it is no wonder that growth-driven missions have led to the calamitous, and paradoxical, irrelevancy of churches within society. While not the easy approach, church-based missions as faithful witness recentres churches as prophetic ambassadors of God's reconciliation, acting out of the certain hope of the *missio Dei*, and not swayed by the allure of novelty or the comfort of capitalist consumerism.

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with the personal God directly rather than accept beliefs or concepts — it is an epistemological shift from truth in knowledge to truth in encounter, where the missioner is not the arbiter of truth but points to the encounter.

[60] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 208. The homogeneous unit principle (HUP) is McGavran's idea (first posited in the 1970s) that churches grow most successfully when Christians reach out to those who are demographically similar, creating a monolithic church culture.

We are Pilgrims on a Journey: Reimagining Church Membership in Contemporary Wales

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Abstract
This article is our theological and missional response to a practical and pressing question: what does it mean to be a member of a Baptist church in Wales today? The classic Baptist understanding is that a Baptist Christian will make a believer's commitment to Christ (baptism) and simultaneously a commitment to belong to a specific group of Baptist believers (membership). It is our contention that this understanding has now been largely replaced by a tacit assumption that, instead, a Baptist Christian's commitment is largely one to an *organisation*. In this article, we call for these two original commitments to be once again separated and individually honoured. We argue that, today, a commitment to a specific group of Baptist believers on a spiritual pilgrimage is a compelling metaphor for church membership. We also argue the case for seeing baptism as a pilgrim participation in Christ's story.

Keywords
Baptist; pilgrimage; membership; baptism; Wales; mission.

Introduction

> It was a tragic day when the fellowship of the early church groups faded out into church membership […] the Kingdom of God consists in just this loving, blessed fellowship, the *Verbundenheit* among the 'saints'. Church members can hate one another. My membership is external, fellowship is divine and internal.[1]

[1] Thomas R. Kelly, *The Eternal Promise: A Contemporary Quaker Classic and a Sequel to A Testament of Devotion,* 3rd edn (Friends United Press, 2016), pp. 103, 106.

Baptist Church membership (in the United Kingdom at least) is undergoing an existential crisis. This is a crisis on at least three levels. It is an ontological crisis, because the common understanding of what it means to be a church member has changed significantly over the last two hundred years or so. It is an ecclesiological crisis, because changes in UK charity law mean that the role of the member in church governance has lost its clarity. And it is a theological crisis, because of the loss of a common understanding of what contemporary expressions of covenant and discipleship might look like.

In this article, we examine these three different aspects of church membership, and we propose that some of the difficulties described might be overcome by adopting 'pilgrimage' as a contemporary metaphor for church membership. We also explore different understandings of baptism and suggest that the formative water experiences in the exodus story might offer a new and radical way of rethinking the role of baptism in our churches.

What is a Church Member?

Membership of Baptist churches emerged at a time when the default religious affiliation in the United Kingdom was to a national church closely regulated by the monarchy and the state. This religious affiliation was usually by birth (default) rather than choice, and so membership of a Baptist church denoted a personal conviction of certain theological beliefs. It was understood as entering into a covenant with others in a community who shared the same beliefs, and part of this covenant was an agreement to adhere to certain moral codes — in other words, membership also required a commitment to a certain way of life.[2] In both beliefs and praxis, therefore, a member of a Baptist church marked themselves out from the 'world'. Baptist churches would often have a written covenant for their members, and also provision for banning or expelling members who were deemed to have violated the covenant. This was to be expected for a system which evolved under the pressure of persecution. One of the earliest examples of this is the 1606

[2] See, for example, Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Wipf and Stock, 2005), chs 2–3.

Gainsborough covenant (from the recollection of William Bradford), of a separatist congregation, which used the metaphor of pilgrimage to describe their relationship to each other and to God.[3] This congregation came under the leadership of John Smyth. Consequently, later, the first Baptists also made it clear that both the fellowship and the uncertainty of pilgrimage would be a key part of their baptistic identity: they would be open to what they would (together) learn of God, they would do their best before God, and they would need God's help to do this:

> As the Lord's free people joined themselves together by covenant as a church, in the fellowship of the gospel to walk in all His ways, made known, or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavour, whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.[4]

The authors of this article have been in pastoral ministry and working in a Baptist College in Wales for many years, and during that time we have seen a new (mis)understanding of church membership emerge. Rather than being committed to a covenanted community with a (narrowly) defined set of beliefs and allowable praxis, church membership in the twenty-first century is increasingly seen as 'belonging to an organisation'. In terms almost precisely parallel to belonging to a golf club, for instance, members attend the organisation's events (Sunday services, midweek groups, social events), they bring their children and sometimes their spouses along, they join the leadership committee (deacons/elders), and they give of their gifts and spare time to paint the club house (vestry) or decorate the premises (flower rota). Even tithing or financial giving is increasingly seen in this light. One

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[3] James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Herald Press, 1991), pp. 33–34. Coggins explores the debate about where the covenanting took place on pages 56–60.

[4] *Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608–1650*, ed. by Harold Paget (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 7. This is a modern English version of the 17th-century text. Governor William Bradford's original manuscript, *Of Plimoth Plantation,* p. 6, states, 'And as ye Lord's free people, joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in ye felowship of ye gospell to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them (according to their best endeavours) whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.' Available online from the Digital Collection of the State Library of Massachusetts <http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/208249> [accessed 30 October 2005].

church member asked one of us to visit her in hospital, commenting, 'After all, I've paid my membership.'

Who's in Charge Here?

One of the three key statements of the UK Baptists' Declaration of Principle is '[t]hat our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws'.[5] Traditionally, Baptists have equated the word 'Church' here with church members, leading to a system of governance whereby members come together in a church meeting to prayerfully discern the mind of Christ on matters large (like calling a new minister) and small (like whether or not to keep the pews). In theory, at least, becoming a church member meant having a say in the governance of the church.

However, changes in UK charity law this century have meant that each church needs to appoint managing trustees who bear the responsibility for the governance and financial management of the church and its assets. In Baptist churches, the deacons are these managing trustees, and so in the eyes of the law at least, it is the deacons who are responsible for decisions taken by the church. This has clouded the role of the church member in governance, and tended to favour those who prefer a style of leadership which is concentrated in the hands of the few.

What Would Jesus Do?

There is another problem with the inherited model of church members being collectively responsible for the governance of a church. It is that, increasingly, church members are not theologically homogeneous. If the majority of members of a Baptist church have not grown up in Baptist chapels, they may have little understanding of the classic concepts of covenant and 'walking with and watching over one another' which

[5] See Baptist Union of Great Britian, 'Declaration of Principle', Baptists Together <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx> [accessed September 2024].

undergird the Baptist ecclesiology. This, coupled with increasing Biblical illiteracy among churchgoers, may mean that 'discerning the mind of Christ' degenerates into a business model of an Annual General Meeting style of gathering.

Is it just us?

We wanted to test whether there was any empirical evidence for our sense of this existential crisis for Baptist church membership. We therefore shared an early form of this article with a gathering of Baptist ministers and church members in January 2025.[6] We set out the three aspects of the problem as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Three elements of contemporary society that lead to confusion around Baptist church membership

And we asked the question 'To what extent have these three aspects been an issue in your church?'. Participants (around 40) were invited to respond anonymously by using the online tool Mentimeter. They got into ten smaller groups, discussed, and voted. Answers were recorded using a five-point scoring scale, where 0 is 'totally disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree'. The results are presented in Figure 2.

[6] In a more recent survey with a different group of Baptist church leaders, we asked the same questions and received almost identical results. The results in Figure 2 are used with the permission of participants.

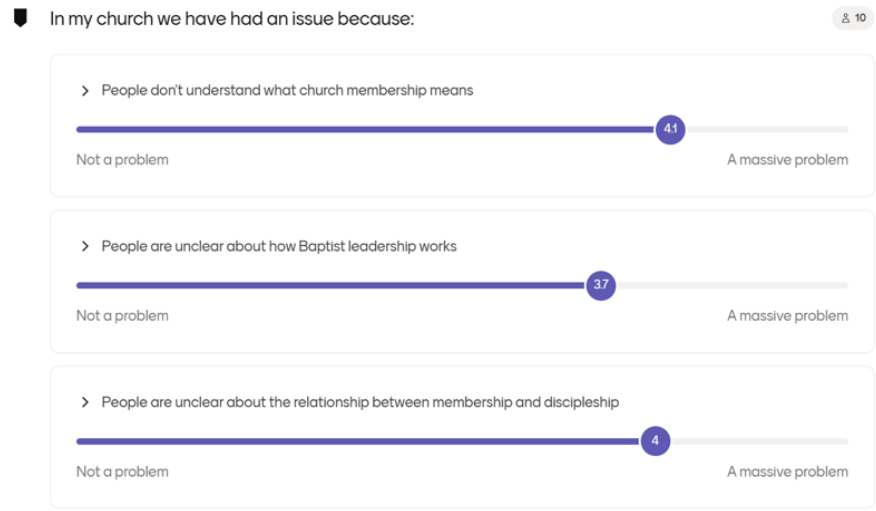

Figure 2. Aggregated results of a survey of Baptist church leaders.

The evidence, as seen in Figure 2, therefore suggests that we are not alone in identifying these three aspects of the problem.

Pilgrims on a Journey

It is a commonplace trope to attribute the decline in church attendance/membership to increasing secularisation, a suspicion of established authority, and a growing resistance to any sort of regular commitment. We do not deny that these may be actual sociological trends, but we do not think that they are the main problem. Or at least, we think that there is another major cause — and one that (unlike the three trends just cited) we can actually do something about.

In 1966 Richard Kelly published a collection of essays written by his father Thomas, author of the Quaker classic *A Testament of Devotion*. In several of these essays, Kelly argues strongly that the problem with church decline (even then!) cannot be laid at the door of those outside. Rather, it is that the church has lost its fire. Here is but one example from a speech Kelly gave:

> Let us be utterly honest tonight. I may appear to be speaking more to the ministers among you, but I really mean to speak to you all. Some of us have gotten so tangled with time, with committees, with service programs, with pushing about institutional machinery that we have lost something of the radiant glow of Eternity which we once saw dawning within us. The time was when God was very near, when heaven's joy was pressing upon us on every side, and the world seemed to lie at our feet, and at His feet. But now heaven's echo has grown distant, and we are weary, and somewhat disillusioned, and not wholly unspotted by the world. And the Sundays come crowding upon us, and we are spiritually dry.[7]

We agree with Kelly, and we hope that we are not being needlessly provocative in claiming that the problem with church membership as belonging to an institution is that the institution is not terribly attractive. For many people, the Covid-19 pandemic broke the long-ingrained habit of getting up early on a Sunday morning to sit in a pew while other people were still in bed, and they just have not returned. And yet our experience of presiding at 'secular' funerals, going into schools, reading social media, and chatting to our friends tells us that people still have a great interest in spiritual matters. The great questions of life have not changed: How can I be happy? Why do I do bad things? Why is there so much suffering? How can I live a good life? How can I find love? Why am I so lonely? How can I be safe? How can I make the world a better place? It is just that people do not expect to find the answers to these questions inside a church.

We think that this is because the church itself has not been asking these questions for a long time. Perhaps we (the church) have set ourselves up as the place to which you can come for answers, but we are not terribly convincing as the people who have it all sorted out. Instead, we (the authors) think that we Christians need to recover our identity as those on a spiritual journey, disciples following Jesus. Pilgrims.

What is Pilgrimage?

The English word *pilgrim* and the Welsh word *pererin* come to us via Old French from the Latin *peregrinus/pelegrinus* — *'per'* as in *beyond*, and *'agro'* meaning *field*. Pilgrims are those who have to leave the security of their

[7] Thomas Kelly, *The Eternal Promise*, p. 110.

fields and go beyond. Originally, religious pilgrimages were carried out to holy shrines either because it was believed that the deity actually dwelt there, or as a spiritual discipline which confirmed one's spiritual devotion and perhaps conferred some spiritual blessing such as healing, forgiveness of sins, or answered prayer. In the Old Testament, Israel's decades' long journey through the desert becomes emblematic of the wider biblical narrative arc from captivity to freedom, and in both Testaments we read about people (Jesus included) who go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or to the Jordan for worship, healing, or baptism.

The New Testament and 'The Way'

In the New Testament, the frequently occurring Greek word that relates to pilgrimage is *hodos* (occurring 406 times). *Hodos* originally meant a road or street, but soon came to refer to a journey, such as a bird's 'flight' or an army's 'march'.[8] Figurative usage is also early, where it often refers to 'manner of life', or, we might say, 'approach to life'. The metaphorical use of the term in religious expressions is very familiar from the Hebrew Bible. The 'two ways' metaphor appears most famously in Deuteronomy 30, but also in the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, and other early Christian literature (e.g. *The Didache* 1:1 and following). Here, the emphasis seems to be on the choice that a fork in the path requires, and that the chosen way will represent a person's obedience and commitment — or otherwise — to God's 'path'. In these cases, *hodos* almost always translates the Hebrew word *derek* and metaphorically represents the individual or group's life before God. However, despite the prominence of the 'two ways' metaphor in much Jewish and Christian thinking, we should not automatically read it into every occurrence of *hodos*.

This is particularly the case in the Gospels where *hodos* means the very literal dust paths that Jesus and his followers use, but also — and at the same time — the figurative following of the Son of Man as

[8] Wilhelm Michaelis, 'Ὁδός, Ὁδηγός, Ὁδηγέω, Μεθοδία, Εἴσοδος, Ἔξοδος, Διέξοδος, Εὐοδόω', in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 5, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedfrich (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 42–97 (p. 42).

disciples and others. In Mark's Gospel in particular, being 'on the way' (10:32) becomes almost a technical term for discipleship.[9]

There are a variety of people at a variety of stages who travel with Jesus 'along the way'. We are familiar with the Twelve, but we should note that it is precisely on 'the way' that they reveal their lack of understanding of the mission of Christ (Mark 10). Other followers include a rich young man, who decides that the journey is not for him; Bartimaeus who receives his sight (10:52); and a disciple who needed to hear that the journey might involve homelessness (Luke 9:57). There were 'great crowds' who 'followed [Jesus]' (e.g. Matt 12:15), who were often seeking healing. Then after the resurrection, the 'way' to Emmaus becomes a prototype for belief in the risen Christ.

Given the variety of people who followed Jesus along 'the way', it is clear that this path did not mean a settled commitment to Jesus, or even a basic understanding of his teaching. Rather, the expression included those with an interest in going along with Jesus to hear more or receive something from him, to be part of the pilgrim band, or simply to see what would happen.

In John's Gospel, Thomas asks Jesus, 'How can we know the way?' (John 14:5); Jesus famously replies, 'I am the way' (John 14:6). In other words, the term *hodos* has, by this time, become strongly and personally associated with the person of Jesus himself.

The First Christians and 'The Way'

Given the significance of the *hodos* language in the Gospels, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in the book of Acts, the term 'The Way' takes on new relationship with the first Christians. In particular, it seems to be a term used to describe the movement of people that became known as Christians (Acts 11:26). As Paul puts it before the Roman Governor Felix, 'according to the Way [*hodos*], which they [Paul's opponents] call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors' (Acts 24:14; cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22). Paul identified himself and the teaching of Christ

[9] For example, Morna Hooker comments, 'The road (ὁδός, cf. v. 17) on which Jesus' followers travel with him is also "the Way", an early term for discipleship.' Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, BNTC (Continuum, 1991), p. 245.

proclaimed through the church with the term 'the Way', and, moreover, Luke is keen to promote the idea that this name was known also to the gentile Roman authorities (e.g. 'Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way', Acts 24:22).

Hence, Luke's volume on the expansion of Christ's church, takes the idea of being on a road, on a journey, on 'the way', and uses it metaphorically to describe the first Christian groups and the proclamation and teaching of Christ. We might say, therefore, that at the heart of Christianity from the earliest days, was the idea of *pilgrimage*, and there is something about this movement, this journey, that becomes a mark of Christian identity.

The Reformation Christians and 'The Way'

By the time of the European reformations, religious pilgrimage in Europe was widely associated with the (Roman) Catholic Church and the earning of spiritual merit, and for this reason pilgrimage sites were commonly plundered and the practice discouraged in Puritan or Calvinist areas. However, the popularity of texts such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*[10] (1678) and William Williams Pantycelyn's great hymn (1762) *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah*[11] show that, rather than disappearing, the idea of pilgrimage became allegorised and internalised as an interior pilgrimage, or 'pilgrimage of the heart'. And sometimes the two sorts of pilgrimage were combined: for instance, the English separatists who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower in 1620 were known as the *Pilgrim* Fathers as they underwent a physical journey in search of a new physical and spiritual home where they would be free to worship.

The Early Baptists and their Commitment to 'Walk Together'

As we have already seen, the first non-conformists, including Baptists, adopted a commitment to 'to walk in all his [Christ's] ways, made known, or to be made known to them'. This image became characteristic

[10] Its fuller title is *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That which is to Come,* which reinforces the point about the allegorisation of the pilgrimage process.

[11] The 1762 date refers to the original publication of the Welsh version of the hymn, *Arglwydd arwain trwy'r anialwch*, which refers to the pilgrim *(fi bererin gwael ei wedd)* in the second line.

of Baptist covenants. It expressed a desire for the community to be *together* in the journey of discovery that is the Christian faith.[12] It contained a recognition that this journey was not an individual one, but that it is shared with others. This makes sense when we consider that they were not just encouraging one another to maintain the ways of Christ that they already knew, but to discern and follow the ways that were yet to be made known. The image of 'walking' on a 'way' helpfully captures the idea of shared experiences and shared recollections of the journey so far, but also of the unknown, yet-to-be-discovered elements of the journey still to come. As Paul Fiddes puts it, 'The image is a dynamic one, of pilgrimage and process.'[13] In other words, we suggest that the metaphorical pilgrimage with Christ was present in the earliest days of Baptist developments as represented in their formational covenants.

Pilgrimage Today

There is evidence that the popularity of physical pilgrimages is on the up — for instance, the BBC2 television series *Pilgrimage,* which features celebrities from different faiths trekking together on established pilgrimage routes is now (2025) on its seventh season. Describing the original 2018 series following the route to Santiago, the *Guardian* newspaper had this to say:

> There were no road-to-Damascus experiences and very little piety. Instead, when seven people in the public eye walked the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrimage route across northern Spain, there were many arguments and much snoring and swearing.
>
> The group — a priest, an atheist and assorted believers and non-believers — discussed the values shaping their lives while retracing the steps of medieval *peregrinos*. Along the way, they forged friendships and encountered some of

[12] See, for example, Paul S. Fiddes, '"Walking Together": The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today', in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, ed. by W. H. Brackney, P. S. Fiddes, and J. H. Y. Briggs (Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 47–74.
[13] Fiddes, '"Walking Together"', p. 48.

> the hundreds of thousands of people who walk the Camino each year, part of a resurgence in pilgrimages.[14]

Many arguments, not much piety, much snoring and swearing. Discussion of values shaping lives; priests, atheists, and everyone in between travelling together; friendships forged. Could this possibly be church?!

People go on pilgrimages for all sorts of reasons — to have space to grieve; to recover from burnout; to slow down; to seek wisdom; to seek God; to encounter nature; as a challenge. All of these reasons open up a space for people to have a genuine encounter with God in the way that the membership of a bounded institution does not. Pilgrimages require the sacrifice of security; they entail running risks; they force you to rely on the kindness of strangers, and they deepen your appreciation of food and companions to eat it with. These conditions are beginning to sound very like discipleship. And pilgrimages give you the opportunity to make new companions, who may need to rely on you if they get injured — or you may need to rely on them. And so walking with and watching over one another is the very stuff that pilgrimages are made of. In the walking, there is time to listen to one another's stories, and deep fellowship is forged.

We would like to see our Baptist churches say, We are not a building or a club or institution with rules you must follow. We are fellow travellers on a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey of following Jesus. We do not know where we are going, except that Jesus has promised that he is the Way. We have, if we are honest, more questions than answers. We do not always behave well, but we try. We are not always quite sure what we believe: some of us are very clear about this, but others have doubts. We like singing and eating together. We try to love one another, because that is what Jesus told us to do. We listen to each other's stories, and we look after each other. We learn together about Jesus and from him, and together we try to make the world a better place according to his great command to love. Will you come and join us?

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[14] Harriet Sherwood, 'Faith, Friendship and Curses as Seven Celebrity Pilgrims Trek to Santiago', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/14/modern-pilgrimage-road-to-santiago-journey-self-discovery> [accessed 13 November 2025].

What about Baptism?

Traditionally, membership of a Baptist church has been seen as belonging to an organisation. The entry bar is high: acceptance of a certain set of beliefs and living under the lordship of Christ. This, in turn, entails certain restraints and standards of moral behaviour, as well as the usual expectation of an organisation that members give their time, presence, gifts, and money to support the cause.

This article suggests that, instead, we offer potential church members the opportunity to commit to a spiritual pilgrimage. This is commitment to at least three things:

1. A commitment to a specific band of pilgrims (local church) who are on the same spiritual journey. This may be expressed as a church covenant.
2. A commitment to following Jesus as the Guide, even though the journey may take us to unexpected places. This may be expressed as a public statement of faith during the membership ceremony.
3. A commitment to a way of being church which allows for questions and doubts as well as joyful worship. This will be worked out by regular meetings of the pilgrims (church meetings), and it may be that the ancient practice of *examen* would be a good way of holding these discussions.

If, then, we adopt this model of membership-as-pilgrimage, where does baptism fit in? We are not the first to ask this question, as Fiddes points out from ecumenical conversations: 'The basic proposal made by Baptist conversation-partners was, and is, to place baptism in a wider context, or a longer journey.'[15]

Baptism as a Deciding Commitment to Christ

Over the years of Christian practice, baptism has symbolised a number of aspects of the Christian journey: forgiving sin, conversion, joining the

[15] Paul Fiddes, 'Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation Reconsidered', *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts*, 75.3 (2024), pp. 135–143 (p. 135).

church, to name but three.[16] The particular role that baptism plays in *effecting* as opposed to *representing* these events varies from one Christian tradition to another.

However, within the approach we are pursuing, we wish to emphasise the role that baptism plays in representing commitment. As the language of pilgrimage ('the Way') was used in the book of Acts to represent the first Christian groups and their commitment to Christ and his teaching, we want to approach baptism, initially, through the book of Acts.

Baptism and the Church of Pentecost

On the day of Pentecost, in the first recorded instance of *Christian* baptism (we note the role of the 'name of Jesus Christ'; Acts 2:38), '3000 people were added' (Acts 2:41) we are told. But before we assume too readily that this is the same as our typical understanding of baptism today, let us reflect a moment. Given that the audience of Peter's sermon was, 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven' (Acts 2:5; cf. Acts 2:14, 22), the many respondents in baptism would therefore have been these same Jews. This means, firstly, that baptism cannot have here represented a *conversion* to God for this was already the God whom these devout Jews worshipped (and, indeed, this was why they were present in Jerusalem). Nor, secondly, can it have meant *joining* the people of God, for they were *already* members of God's people: Israel. Rather, in this instance at least, baptism seems to have meant, primarily, a *particular commitment to, and identification with, Jesus Christ* (hence, the use of Jesus's 'name' alone in the baptismal formula; Acts 2:38[17]) for those who were already in relationship with God and God's people.

This particular commitment was expressed, by the candidate, through repentance and baptism, and, by God, through forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. But more than this, baptism was held out to his hearers by Peter as an invitation to become participants in a particular (Christian) understanding of the story of God. The receipt of the Spirit,

[16] For a helpful discussion, see Robin Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity* (Baker Academic, 2012).
[17] Cf. Lars Hartman, *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus*, SNTW (T&T Clark, 1997), p. 39.

on the day of Pentecost and in baptism, was proclaimed as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:16–21; Joel 2:28–32). Jesus of Nazareth is presented as the one about whom David spoke (Acts 2:25–28; Psalm 16:8–11), as well as the crucified one who has been made 'both Lord and Messiah' by God (Acts 2:36).

In other words, as signified by being baptised and receiving the Spirit, these worshippers of God are not simply assenting to a particular interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, but entering experientially into the story of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. As Paul Blowers puts it, baptism is a 'celebration or ritual enactment of the drama of sacred history'.[18] He continues that the early Church Father Cyril of Jerusalem 'acknowledges that baptism is a mimesis, a representation'. Thus, while baptism is certainly a major point in an individual's story, it also represents and reenacts entry into a story shared with others. The Spirit is poured out on all those in the upper room because they represent 'all flesh'. The Spirit is poured out on the 3000 from 'every nation' because they represent 'all flesh'. For the baptised, this identification with Christ's salvation story, meant a commitment to Jesus's teaching and practice (which included common meals and prayer; Acts 2:42). Moreover, it meant a commitment to a particular fellowship of fellow-pilgrims also on the Way. But this was not the same as 'church membership' since, as we have seen, those baptised on Pentecost were already part of God's people.

Therefore, in this instance, we have a picture of baptism enabling those who are 'on the Way' to share in the same commitment to Christ as others,[19] and to identify with Christ as others have done, and to acknowledge before God and God's people the cruciform shape that their lives have now taken. This is certainly a bodily and spiritual experience — the Spirit of Christ is active in baptism as we have seen. However, it is also a representative experience, representing the full

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[18] Paul Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life* (Fortress, 2019), p. 119.

[19] In an article considering the nature of baptism for those who are baptised some years after a point of deciding faith, one of Paul Beasley-Murray's research correspondents describes baptism as 'a response from people already on the way'. Paul Beasley-Murray, 'Baptism for the Initiated', in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, JSNTS 171, ed. by Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 467–476 (p. 470).

entry into the story of God's people in Christ. Therefore, although people may share in the pilgrimage with others at different levels and with different understanding, at some point, the baptised are those who share in a decided commitment to participate together in Christ, in his salvation, and in his story.

Baptism and the Exodus

We see this same idea represented in another way. In the New Testament and in early Christianity, baptism was often linked with the story of the exodus (*ek-hodos* – the 'way out'). So, we read in Paul,

> Our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. (1 Cor 10:1-2)

Similarly, Origen draws the comparison between baptism and the crossing of the Red Sea.

> The just person crosses the Red Sea as though on dry land […] O Christian, the divine word promises much greater and loftier things for you who, through the sacrament of baptism, have parted the waters of the Jordan. It promises a way and a passage for you through the air itself. (Origen, *Homily 4 on Joshua 1*)[20]

Recalling, then, the exodus story, the Hebrews face shared slavery in Egypt, and God calls Moses to lead the people out. They journey together through the Egyptian desert, with God as their guide and protector. They face the Red Sea ('Sea of Reeds'), and all with faith to enter where the waters have been parted, pass through unscathed, to continue their journey in the wilderness.

In this understanding, where baptism is understood in light of the miraculous escape through the Red Sea, baptism is a necessary part of a journey, but neither is it the beginning nor the ending of that journey. The journey is for those who sense the leading of God, identifying and going forward with God's people, and who are willing to make the same commitment to enter God's miracle of salvation. For

[20] This is not the only significance of water in the exodus story. The early church also used various episodes of wilderness wanderings in connection with other sacraments. The wine of the Lord's Supper was understood through the transformation of the waters in the exodus story. See Ambrose of Milan, *On the Sacraments*, 4.18; Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life*.

those who pass through the waters, on the other side is not an automatic resolution of doubts or revelation of the knowledge of God. But there is a continued journey in the company of others to discover God together, to struggle with the commitment that has been made, and to live with the discernment of the onward path. While this shares many characteristics of the journey prior to baptism, both the newly baptised and their baptised companions have made a commitment and shared in the experience of salvation by passing 'through the waters'.

Of course, the crossing of the Red Sea is not the only passing 'through the waters' of the exodus story on the pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Origen, for example, notes the crossing of the Jordan as another occasion and that both crossings are fulfilled 'now' in the believer's baptism.[21] To play with this idea a little, we recognise that along the journey, there will inevitably be a number of stages of commitment. In some religious traditions, in this case Buddhism, such moments are even called 'stream-entries'. Yet there is a marked difference between those who have made the commitment to cross the Red Sea who then make further and deeper commitments in the company of their fellow pilgrims, and those who 'take the plunge' for the first time.[22]

Hence, we note that the New Testament writers and early Christians adopted a theological interpretation of the exodus story[23] such that the escape through the Red Sea was understood as, in some way, congruent with baptism. This makes sense when we recognise that the *ek-hodos* is, quite literally, a journey on the 'Way'. For these writers and preachers who already understood their own Christian identity as disciples through the metaphor of the journey, or pilgrimage, it was a natural step to see baptism as another point on the journey, but

[21] Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life*, p. 119.

[22] We might see parallels here with the practice of 'renewing the vows of baptism through being sprinkled with water, especially at the Easter eucharist'. Paul Fiddes, 'Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation Reconsidered', p. 140.

[23] See, for example, *Exodus in the New Testament*, LNTS 663, ed. by Seth M. Ehorn (T&T Clark, 2022). We note the flexibility of this theological interpretation in early Christianity, as Tertullian links baptism with the Passover, on account of the Last Supper. *Tertullian's Homily On Baptism*, ed. and trans. by Ernest Evans (SPCK, 1964), p. 41.

nevertheless a decisive one. For the believer who was baptised, they were making a decision to commit themselves to Christ and Christ's story. Their life now became understood through the lens of the salvation story, following the 'Way' of Christ. Moreover, this was a shared story, shared with those fellow pilgrims who had taken the same decision to be baptised. Baptism was neither the beginning nor the end of the journey, which began before baptism and continued afterwards, but it was a critical marker on the journey.

Therefore, far from being a clumsy add-on to an understanding of church membership as pilgrimage, baptism becomes an integral and natural part of that journey, and a critical point for those who would make the commitment to become part of Christ's shared salvation story.

Conclusion

This article has explored a new model of church membership for contemporary Wales. Membership in Baptist churches has become much less than it might have been as the language of 'membership' has been related to the membership of an *organisation*: a golf club, a dining group, a Baptist church. This understanding is only strengthened by continuing restrictions placed on churches-as-charities in the UK. However, this article has argued that membership should, instead, be a decisive commitment to a particular people. This is best understood as sharing together in a pilgrimage, an image that is both relevant and redolent in contemporary Welsh society.

However, we have noted that people in Wales often wish to be members of a church, even though they may not be able to express their faith in normally accepted theological cadences. They have a strong commitment to the people, and seek the opportunity to explore together with others the meaning and significance of the journey for themselves. Hence, rather than using church membership as a way of *excluding* those who do not pass a theological test, this article argues for the value of church membership in *including* all those who wish to share the journey, recognising that faith is most often formed through sharing life with others 'on the Way'.

It is clear, then, that this proposed model brings the bar for membership down to a significantly lower level. In the traditional model, the bar for membership was high, requiring specific commitment to certain doctrines and an agreed set of behaviours. This was completely appropriate in the context of state persecution within which Baptist church membership first arose. However, today, the context is one of secularisation and general religious illiteracy, and it seems a wise, contextually-driven, missiological decision to lower the bar for entry.

Ours is not such an unusual proposal as it might seem at first sight, as pilgrimage has been an important part of Christian practice from the beginning. Moreover, we saw that the very varied group of people who followed Jesus could be described as pilgrim followers on the way. Similarly, the first Christians in Acts used the language of the 'Way' as part of their new identity, their self-understanding in their relationship with Christ and his teaching.

However, since this is not the traditional order in which baptism precedes membership, we asked what role there might be for baptism within this scheme. In fact, if membership is a decided commitment to a particular group of people, baptism is a decided commitment to Christ. There is nothing new here except that we saw that the baptisms on the day of Pentecost were not so much a doorway for entry into the church as they represented an entering into a particular story, the story of salvation through Christ, shared with other believers. This was confirmed by the symbolic use of the exodus story by the early Christians where the crossing of the Red Sea was representative of baptism. In such a schema, baptism was a significant and decisive step, but neither marked the beginning nor the end of the journey, but was, instead, a commitment to the journey itself and the God of the journey, and became an identity marker. Baptism, therefore, fits well into the idea of membership as pilgrimage.

Other questions arise which will not be answered here: to what extent can a person on the pilgrimage be a leader; are there any requirements beyond being 'on the Way'? Is there a minimum theological expectation for a person to be baptised, or is commitment to entering the ongoing story of salvation sufficient? Is there a particular

stage of the journey at which baptism should 'normally' be entered in to, and is there the possibility of rebaptism (if, like Origen, we see the different formative water experiences in the exodus story of the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan as both representative of baptism)?

While there are clearly other questions to be worked out, this model of a deciding commitment to a group of people (church membership, understood as pilgrimage), followed by a deciding commitment to Christ (baptism), offers an approach that is consonant with the mission of God in contemporary Wales. It seems to continue the work of the early non-conformists, including Baptists, as they sought to 'walk together in all [Christ's] ways, made known or *to be made known*'.

Shared Leadership in the Early Church: The Plural Office of Elder/Bishop

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Abstract
Ecclesiastical governance reflects underlying theological commitments, embodying and reinforcing beliefs about ministry and leadership. Conceptions of church governance also contribute to the well-being and the dysfunction of congregations. Therefore, this study explores Christian polity by examining key New Testament terms — πρεσβύτερος (elder), ἐπίσκοπος (overseer/bishop), and ποιμήν (shepherd/pastor) — to gain a better understanding of early church governance. We find that New Testament texts do not distinguish between the offices of elder and bishop. The mono-episcopacy, with a sharp delineation between these two positions, appears to have emerged at the very end of the first century or the beginning of the second century CE. Additionally, elders/bishops, rather than 'pastors' occupying a unique office, pastored or shepherded God's people. Finally, early churches practised plural leadership with multiple individuals leading simultaneously. These insights challenge contemporary governance models in which a single pastoral authority dominates, reminding us that ministry is the shared responsibility of the body of Christ.

Keywords
Leadership; governance; polity; bishop; elder; pastor; New Testament; patristics

Introduction

Rules and norms of church governance and leadership are, in the words of the theologian and priest Paul Avis, 'covert theological statements'.[1]

[1] Paul Avis, 'Editorial: From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiastical Polity', *Ecclesiology*, 11.3 (2015), pp. 285–88 (p. 286), doi:10.1163/17455316-01103002.

How a congregation governs itself embodies and reinforces both conscious and subconscious theological ideas. For instance, a plural leadership model could be an expression of or foster a commitment to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (e.g. Exod 19:5–6 and 1 Pet 2:4–9). Similarly, a strong clergy-laity divide, in formal structure or in practice, can limit 'lay' Christians' vision of and engagement in ministry — implicitly reinforcing the idea that ministry is the purview primarily of pastors or priests. Moreover, ecclesiastical structure is a factor in numerous challenges facing contemporary Christianity. A reduced view of eldership is an element in the recent spate of high-profile firings of domineering pastors. Singular leadership models can be fertile soil for the growth of egocentric 'celebrity pastors' and personality cults. Additionally, the over-reliance on professional clergy is increasingly difficult to sustain as seminary enrolments decline.

With these considerations in mind, this article examines New Testament and other early Christian writings to gain a fuller understanding of ecclesiastical governance and leadership. Our research focuses on the Greek words πρεσβύτερος (elder), ἐπίσκοπος (overseer or bishop), επισκοπή (bishopric), ἐπισκοπέω (to oversee), and, to a lesser extent ποιμήν (shepherd or pastor) and ποιμαίνω (to shepherd or pastor). These terms are central to Christian ecclesiology, past and present.

Evidence from Scripture and other sources supports several conclusions. First, New Testament texts do not distinguish between the offices of elder and bishop. The mono-episcopacy, with a sharp delineation between these two positions, appears to have emerged in the very late first century or early second century CE. Additionally, elders/bishops, rather than 'pastors' occupying a unique office, pastored or shepherded churches. In fact, little evidence exists of a separate office of pastor or shepherd in the New Testament or other early Christian writings. Finally, many churches practised plural or shared leadership, with multiple individuals often holding the titles of elder and bishop.

New Testament and Offices in the Early Church

The New Testament is undoubtedly the most significant source of information on early Christian polity. Therefore, in this section, we examine key biblical texts related to the offices of the early church. The following analysis does not purport to excavate *the* unique or universal model of church leadership in the New Testament. Instead, what follows aims to introduce the most relevant passages, themes, and terms related to New Testament church offices. While focusing principally on πρεσβύτερος (elder), ἐπίσκοπος (overseer or bishop), and ποιμήν (pastor or shepherd), this section also touches on διάκονος (deacon), ἀπόστολος (apostle), ιερεύς (priest), and several other related terms. Furthermore, the treatment of New Testament texts below is not comprehensive — the length of a journal article does not permit such an approach. On the contrary, the goal of this section, and the article more broadly, includes two more circumspect outcomes: (a) to provide an overview of early Christian polity; and (b) to illuminate the most essential lines for further exploration.

Πρεσβύτερος and Ἐπίσκοπος Describe the Same Office in the New Testament

One of the central questions of New Testament ecclesiastical structure is the relationship between πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος. Acts 20:17–28 sheds light on this topic. The passage records Paul delivering a farewell address to the church leaders in Ephesus. He had spent several years with these early Christians and now sought to encourage them on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. Luke writes, in the opening verse of the pericope, that Paul called the πρεσβύτερος of the Ephesian church to meet with him in Miletus (Acts 20:17). In their gathering, Paul admonished the elders to 'keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [ἐπίσκοπος]' (Acts 20:28).[2] Having called the 'elders' to meet with him, Paul subsequently used the appellation 'overseers' or 'bishops' to describe them. A similar semantic overlap of πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος occurs in the Epistle to Titus. The opening chapter instructs

[2] All English language biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, come from the *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version,* updated edn (HarperOne, 2022).

Titus to appoint πρεσβύτερος in cities across Crete (Titus 1:5). Shortly thereafter, the author uses the term ἐπίσκοπος to describe these same future church leaders (Titus 1:7).

The first chapter of Titus then proceeds to list nearly twenty qualifications of πρεσβύτερος/ἐπίσκοπος. The First Epistle to Timothy, which discusses the qualifications for ἐπίσκοπος, includes an enumeration (1 Tim 3:1–7) that closely resembles the one in Titus. Five characteristics match exactly in Greek between the two texts: πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος should be the husband of one wife, self-controlled, hospitable, not addicted to wine, and not pugnacious. A sixth qualification is not identical in Greek, but it is close. In Titus, an elder/bishop must hold 'tightly to the trustworthy word of the teaching, so that he may be able both to exhort with sound instruction and to refute those who contradict it' (Titus 1:9). Similarly, 1 Timothy stipulates that bishops must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2). Finally, a pair of additional strong parallels exist between the two lists of qualifications: (a) 'not be […] greedy for gain' (Titus 1:7) and 'not a lover of money' (1 Tim 3:3); and (b) 'not […] quick-tempered' (Titus 1:7) and 'temperate' (1 Tim 3:2).

Both πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος are also connected to the word προΐστημι. This verb means either 'to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, to be the head (of)' or 'to have an interest in, show concern for, care for, give aid'.[3] The third chapter of 1 Timothy lists the ability to rule or care for (προιστημι) one's own home as a qualification for becoming an ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:4). Similarly, chapter five states that 'the πρεσβύτερος who lead/care (προιστημι) well are to be considered worthy of double honour' (1 Tim 5:17a). Thus, both πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος are responsible for leading/caring well. The parallelism is weakened somewhat by the different contexts of these two pericopes: (a) the households of prospective bishops in chapter three, and (b) congregations in chapter five. However, the use of the same verb in the list of qualifications for both πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος supports the

[3] Walter Bauer, 'προΐστημι', in *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. by F. W. Danker, 3rd edn (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 870.

equivalence seen elsewhere of these two offices. Moreover, Timothy was well acquainted with the Christian church in Ephesus, having served there before receiving the Epistle of 1 Timothy (1 Tim 1:3). As stated above, the book of Acts documents the leadership of πρεσβύτερος who were also called ἐπίσκοπος (Acts 20:28) in the Ephesian church. Thus, Acts and 1 Timothy agree in their characterisations of the ecclesiastical structure of the church in Ephesus: πρεσβύτερος/ἐπίσκοπος.

A final Epistle, 1 Peter, bolsters the conclusion that πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος refer to the same church office in the New Testament. Peter exhorts πρεσβυτέρους (a plural form of πρεσβύτερος) to 'exercis[e] the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly' (1 Pet 5:2). The word translated as 'to oversee', ἐπισκοποῦντες, is a participial form of the verb ἐπισκοπέω — a cognate of the noun ἐπίσκοπος. Thus, Peter records elders overseeing or acting as bishops in congregations.

As a set, these texts suggest that πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος were two terms for the same ecclesiastical office.[4] No text of the New Testament provides clear evidence to the contrary. Thus, we conclude that the delineation between elder and bishop, evident later in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch and others (see the section on the patristic writings later in the article), is not attested in the New Testament.

Wide-Spread Geographic and Chronological Occurrence of Πρεσβύτερος or Ἐπίσκοπος in the New Testament

The geographical spread of the office of πρεσβύτερος/ἐπίσκοπος is also noteworthy as a sign of its broad acceptance. Table 1 shows the locations with which these terms are associated in the New Testament. The office described as both πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος is associated

[4] This is not to suggest that πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος have the same semantic ranges in Greek. The two words may convey different or overlapping aspects of the same office within the church. New Testament scholar Gordon Fee makes this point. Gordon Fee, 'Review of *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature 57, by Benjamin L. Merkle', *Themelios*, 29.3 (2004), online, no page number <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/the-elder-and-overseer-one-office-in-the-early-church-studies-in-biblical-literature-57/> [accessed 12 November 2025].

with Ephesus, Crete, and the recipients of 1 Peter (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia). Additionally, one of the two terms refers to a church office in Antioch, Iconium, Jerusalem, Lystra, Philippi, and the location(s) of the intended audience of the Epistle of James. Yet the New Testament says little about the ecclesiastical structure of congregations in cities such as Rome, Corinth, Galatia, and Colossae. Thus, Table 1 reveals a pattern rather than a definitive doctrine of ecclesiastical structure.

Table 1 Office of Elder/Overseer in NT Congregations

Location	Πρεσβύτερος	Ἐπίσκοπος
Jerusalem	Acts 14, 21	
Ephesus	Acts 20, 1 Timothy 5	Acts 20, 1 Timothy 3
Philippi		Philippians 1
Lystra	Acts 14	
Iconium	Acts 14	
Antioch of Pisidia	Acts 14	
'appoint […] in every city' of Titus's location (Crete)	Titus 1	Titus 1
James's audience	James 5	
Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia	1 Peter 5	1 Peter 5

In addition to providing evidence of the wide geographical spread of elders/bishops, the New Testament records testimony of the office from a broad range of influential early Christian leaders and the traditions associated with them. The apostles Peter and Paul, James, the brother of Jesus, and Luke all refer to this office, and each of them does so using both πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος. Furthermore, Timothy must have been acquainted with this office, given its mention in 1 Timothy and his connection to the church in Ephesus.

The office of elder/bishop is also attested over a relatively broad New Testament chronology.[5] Church leaders holding this position existed in Jerusalem at least as early as the mid-40s of the first century CE (Acts 11:30). Later in that same decade, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they planted (Acts 14:23). Elders also presided along with apostles in approximately 49 CE at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). In the mid- to late-50s, Paul addressed the Ephesian elders/bishops in Miletus (Acts 20). Finally, at the end of his third missionary journey (in the late 50s), Paul saw 'James and all the elders' of the Jerusalem church (Acts 21:17–18).

Plural Church Leadership in the New Testament

A key question regarding elders/bishops in the New Testament is their number within a particular church. As Table 2 shows, in almost half of the pericopes that describe churches as having the office of elder or bishop, the text indicates an office with multiple concurrent officeholders: the churches in Ephesus (Acts 20), Jerusalem, Philippi, Thessaloniki,[6] and the location(s) of James's audience. In the remaining cases — Antioch of Pisidia, Crete, Iconium, Lystra, Peter's audience, and Ephesus (1 Timothy) — the New Testament authors did not specify the number of leaders of local churches at a given time.

There are, however, no unambiguous examples of a New Testament church with an office of elder or bishop occupied by only one individual at one time (see section below, 'An Apostolic Office in the New Testament?', for comments on James in Jerusalem). The Greek texts of the cases in the 'ambiguous' column of Table 2 do not clearly indicate whether the offices are singular or plural. For example, Acts 14 — the chapter which records Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra — states, 'they had appointed elders for them in every church' (Acts 14:23). This phrase could signify

[5] Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 329–330.

[6] 1 Thessalonians 5:12 uses the Greek word προΐστημι for church leaders. See section below on 'Other Terms for New Testament Church Leaders' for a discussion of this Greek term.

one elder in each congregation or multiple elders in every congregation, or some mixture of the two.

Table 2. Plural versus Singular Leadership

Location	Plural	Singular	Ambiguous
Jerusalem	Elders		
Ephesus (Acts 20)	Elders/Overseers		
Ephesus (1 Timothy)			Elder(s)/Overseer(s)/ Position of ruling or caring for others (προΐστημι)
Philippi	Overseers		
Lystra			Elder(s)
Iconium			Elder(s)
Antioch of Pisidia			Elder(s)
Thessaloniki	Those who rule or direct (προΐστημι)		
'In every city' of Titus's location (Crete)			Elder(s)/Overseer(s)
James's audience	Elders		
1 Peter's audience			Elder(s)/Overseer(s)

Two-tier New Testament Church Leadership Structure: Elders/Bishops and Deacons

Though the office of διάκονος (deacon, minister, or server) is not the focus of this article, it appears three times in the New Testament alongside ἐπίσκοπος as an ecclesiastical office of lesser authority.[7] These

[7] For scholarly discussion on the meaning of διάκονος in the New Testament, see John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*, rev. edn (Oxford University Press, 2009); James W. McKinnon, 'On the Meaning of *Diakonos*', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 26.1 (1964), pp.

two cases occur in Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3. Acts 6 arguably constitutes a third case with its distinction between those dedicated to serving or ministering 'the word of God' and those who would serve or minister to widows. This passage uses the noun διάκονος and the verb διακονέω, yet it does not use a specific title for those engaged in the ministry of the Word. These four texts demonstrate the relative prominence in early Christianity of a two-tiered leadership model with elders/bishops and deacons.

Yet, Acts 6 cautions against an overly rigid distinction between elders and deacons. Stephen, shortly after being elected as one of the first seven deacons, performed wonders and signs, debated publicly, and preached with great wisdom. He did all these things on his way to becoming the first known Christian martyr. Thus, the New Testament suggests neither that elders/bishops are uniquely permitted to teach and preach nor that deacons are prohibited from such activity.

An Apostolic Office in the New Testament?

The author of Acts uses the term πρεσβύτερος four times to describe leaders in the Jerusalem church. In two of these instances, Acts 11:30 and 21:18, the word occurs without another potential descriptor of a church office. On the other two occasions, the text pairs πρεσβύτερος with ἀπόστολος. After the Jerusalem Council, the 'apostles and elders, with the whole church' sent a letter whose first line was, 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers and sisters of gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings' (Acts 15:22–23). Shortly thereafter, Luke records that Paul and Timothy, 'as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem' (Acts 16:4).

Although the relationship between apostles and elders in the New Testament warrants a more detailed treatment than the scope and length of this article permit, the following discussion highlights several

14–20; and Moisés Silva, 'διάκονος', in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. by Moisés Silva (Zondervan, 2014), pp. 768–774.

crucial observations.[8] First, Acts 15:13 (the Jerusalem Council) and 21:18 may indicate that James, the brother of Jesus, held a singular leadership position or presiding role among the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Second, if James held a unique position, it does not appear to have carried a unique title apart from 'apostle' or 'elder'. Third, Acts 15 places James among the apostles and elders of Jerusalem, whereas Acts 21:18 mentions James alongside the elders only. Thus, the author of Acts viewed James as an apostle and likely also an elder.[9] Finally, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem are always described as plural groups. Taken together, these texts suggest that James occupied a leading position among the apostles and elders in Jerusalem; however, he does not appear to have held any office or position other than that of apostle and, probably, also elder.[10] Thus, James was not the occupant of a unique and singular ecclesiastical office. Instead, he was most likely a *primus inter pares* among the leaders of the Jerusalem church.

On a related note, Acts 1:20 employs the term επισκοπή, a cognate of ἐπίσκοπος, to signify the position vacated by Judas and subsequently filled by Matthias. Later in the same passage, the author describes this office as both a 'ministry' (διακονία) and an 'apostleship' (ἀποστολή) (Acts 1:25). Based on this passage and other evidence, the twelve apostles may have held a unique office in the Lucan–Acts view. Raymond Brown follows this interpretation, distinguishing between the apostolic office of the twelve apostles and a broader apostolic gifting of Christians.[11] According to this reading, the former type of apostleship ceased to exist after the twelve apostles died. The latter, broader form of apostleship has existed throughout the history of the church and may

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[8] For detailed examinations of apostleship in the New Testament, see Francis H. Agnew, 'The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept: A Review of Research', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 105.1 (1986), pp. 75–96, doi:10.2307/3261112; Mark Schuler, 'The First Apostles', *Global South Theological Journal*, 2.1 (July 6, 2023), pp. 3–10, doi:10.57003/gstj.v2i1.13.

[9] Paul also calls James an 'apostle' in what is likely an account of the same Acts 21 gathering (Gal 1:18–19).

[10] For a fuller discussion of James and the Jerusalem church, see F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James, and John: Non-Pauline Diversity in the Early Church* (Kingsley Books, 2017). Bruce regards James as an elder in the church of Jerusalem based on Acts 21.

[11] Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Paulist Press, 1979).

or may not coincide with an ecclesiastical office. Thus, 1 Clement 42:1–5 records the original generation of apostles preaching the gospel and appointing elders and deacons, rather than new apostles.

Brown makes two additional related observations. First, 'There is no NT evidence that any of the Twelve ever served as head of local congregations.'[12] Second, the traditional identification of some of the twelve apostles as bishops is not found in first-century texts; it derives from the second century or later. James D. G. Dunn, the late New Testament scholar, extends this conversation to the apostleship of Paul, concluding, 'No category of church "office" is adequate to describe [Paul's] function: he was not appointed by the Church, and Paul certainly did not conceive of any succeeding to his apostleship.'[13] Additionally, the New Testament never describes Paul as a bishop or an elder.

Ποιμήν and Ποιμαίνω in the New Testament

In contemporary Protestant churches, the title most often applied to the leader(s) of a congregation is likely 'pastor'. Translations of the Greek New Testament generally render the noun ποιμήν as 'shepherd' or 'pastor' and the related verb ποιμαίνω as 'to shepherd' or 'to pastor'. Most occurrences of these two Greek words describe either Jesus (e.g. Matt 2:6, 9:36, 25:32, 26:31; Mark 14:27; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4; Rev 7:17) or individuals who care for actual sheep (Luke 2:8, 2:15, 2:18, 2:20).

However, the New Testament uses ποιμήν or ποιμαίνω four times in the context of ecclesiastical offices. Both Acts and 1 Peter charge πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος with shepherding (ποιμαίνω) the church of God (Acts 20:28) or the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2). Thus, these two pericopes show that the roles or functions of elder, bishop, and pastor are unified in several New Testament churches. Moreover, no New Testament passage, except possibly Ephesians 4:11–12, describes an office of pastor or shepherd.

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[12] Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 325.

[13] James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Early Christianity*, 3rd edn (SCM Press, 2006), p. 121.

A third passage, in the Gospel of John, records Jesus telling Peter to shepherd (ποιμαίνω) Jesus's metaphorical sheep (John 21:15–17). That Jesus gives this responsibility to Peter, who later calls himself a πρεσβύτερος (1 Pet 5:1), supports, albeit modestly, the pastoral function of elders. Peter's status as one of the twelve disciples and his special role in the kingdom of heaven (e.g. Matt 16:18) warrant caution in linking the office of elder and the function of shepherding solely via his person.

The fourth pericope that links ποιμὴν or ποιμαίνω to an ecclesiastical office outside of Acts 13:1, namely Ephesians 4:11–12, may articulate the most significant alternative to the elder/bishop church leadership pattern in the New Testament. Paul wrote, God 'himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'. Additionally, the Epistle to the Ephesians never mentions elders or bishops. Thus, some interpret the five terms in chapter four as denoting offices or positions within the church.

However, this interpretation creates several difficulties. First, the New Testament offers little support elsewhere for the offices of prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher. While a case can be made for an apostolic office, that view would rely heavily on these two verses and the Jerusalem church (see section above). Second, the text of Ephesians does not state that any of these five terms is meant to describe an ecclesiastical office. Third, as discussed above, other texts associate the tasks of shepherding (Acts 20 and 1 Pet 5) and teaching (1 Tim 5:17 and Titus 1:9) with the office of elder/bishop. Moreover, one of the passages linking the office of elder/bishop to teaching deals directly with the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20).

These observations suggest that Paul did not intend for readers to view apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, or teachers as church offices. The New Testament exegete, Frank Thielman, notes, 'The most probable understanding of the text places the emphasis less on the positions that certain people hold in the church and more on the

activities that Christ has equipped certain people to perform.'[14] Therefore, he concludes, 'the most probable interpretation of this verse sees it as a reference to the work of all believers'.[15] Similarly, Lynn Cohick, a New Testament scholar, observes, 'Paul is not interested here in a particular church structure […] these five functions or tasks serve to equip the church for its ministry.'[16] She also notes that 'the emphasis is on a team who by God's grace strengthens the church'.[17] Thus, Ephesians 4:11–12 supports the concept of plural leadership within the church.

Other Related Biblical Texts and Terms

Though an article of this length cannot aim to provide an exhaustive picture of New Testament texts related to congregational polity, several additional items require preliminary commentary.

Other Uses of πρεσβύτερος

The term πρεσβύτερος is used in several additional ways in the New Testament. It occurs a total of twenty-five times in the synoptic gospels. In these three gospels, 'elder(s)' primarily signifies a group of leaders of Israel, also described as 'elders of the people' or 'elders of the Jews' (Matt 21:33; 26:3, 47; 27:1; Luke 7:3; 20:1; 22:66), during the time of Jesus's ministry. These leaders are often mentioned in conjunction with the high priest (Matt 26:3, 57; Mark 14:53), the chief priests, (Matt 16:21; 21:23; 26:3; 26:47; 26:57; 27:1; 27:3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 12:12; 14:43; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52, 66), teachers of the law (Matt 16:21; 26:57; 27:41; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 12:12; 14:43; 14:53; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52, 66), and Sanhedrin (Matt 26:57–59; Mark 15:1). In addition, two gospels report Jesus speaking of 'the tradition of the elders' (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5).

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14 Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2010), p. 273.
15 Thielman, *Ephesians*, p. 290.
16 Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Joel B. Green (Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 265–270.
17 Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 265.

Acts also uses πρεσβύτερος to signify the elders of the Jewish people (Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 5:21; 6:12; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15). Like the synoptic gospels, Acts associates this cadre of leaders, also called 'the elders of Israel' (Acts 5:21), with the high priest (Acts 5:21; 24:1), chief priests (4:23; 23:14; 25:15), teachers of the law (Acts 4:5; 6:12), and the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:21; 6:12). Furthermore, Acts describes elders as rulers (Acts 4:5, 8).

In addition, πρεσβύτερος occasionally signifies persons who are chronologically older or from a prior generation. Thus, Hebrews 11:2 uses the term to praise the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and others from much earlier in the history of God's people. On a related note, two Epistles of John begin by identifying John as 'the elder' (πρεσβύτερος) (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1). New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall noted two possibilities for the interpretation of this title: 'The word originally meant an old man, but it also came to be used quite naturally for a person exercising oversight and leadership. As such, it was used for leaders in Jewish communities, and it came to be used for groups of leaders in early Christian churches.'[18] The Johannine title may encompass both meanings. However, little concrete evidence exists to determine the exact meaning of the term in this case.

Another Johannine text, the book of Revelation, employs πρεσβύτερος twelve times (Rev 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4). Each of these passages refers to the twenty-four elders seated around the heavenly throne of the Lord. Potentially, the plurality of elders in the heavenly vision supports the plurality of elders in the early church. However, given its unique context, Revelation does not provide direct evidence for understanding the role and number of elders/bishops in early Christian churches.

Other Uses of Ἐπίσκοπος and Cognates

The Greek New Testament contains two cognates of ἐπίσκοπος: ἐπισκοπέω and επισκοπή. The verb ἐπισκοπέω, in addition to connoting

[18] I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), p. 42.

a function of oversight belonging to elders in 1 Peter 5:2, signifies an exhortation 'see to it', or perhaps something like 'be careful to', in Hebrews 12:15. The noun ἐπισκοπή connotes a 'visitation' (Luke 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12) and, as already discussed, the 'office of bishop' (1 Tim 3:1) or 'overseer' (Acts 1:20). The latter case is interesting because it connects, at least lexically, apostles and the bishopric as it employs ἐπισκοπή to signify the position vacated by Judas and filled by Matthias. Additionally, the noun ἐπίσκοπος, while primarily used for the ecclesiastical office of bishop/elder as discussed above, also indicates an 'overseer' or 'guardian' in a more general sense (1 Pet 2:25).

Other Terms for New Testament Church Leaders

New Testament authors use a variety of other words to describe ecclesiastical leadership. Acts reports that 'prophets and teachers' led the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1). Dunn described this as an early Hellenistic pattern of church leadership, preceding the elder/bishop model seen in the Pastoral Epistles.[19] Yet, in this earlier framework, which he called 'the body of Christ as charismatic community', ministry belonged to all Christians, not only to 'the special ministry of a few'.[20] Thus, while the Antioch church structure differed in nomenclature, and likely also in substance, from the elder/bishop model, it relied on plural leadership.

The book of Acts also employs the Greek word κλῆρος (portion, share) in the account of naming Judas's successor among the twelve disciples.[21] Matthias received 'a share' (κλῆρος) of the ministry (διακονίας) of the disciples (Acts 1:17). By the time of Origen (third century), κλῆρος had become an established term for those who hold office in the church.[22] Additionally, the term κληρικός, deriving from κλῆρος, became a synonym for church leadership in later centuries. Moreover, the contemporary English word 'cleric' derives from κλῆρος through the Latin term *clerus*.

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19 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 120.
20 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 120.
21 BDAG, p. 548, s.v. 'κλῆρος'.
22 David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp. 248–249.

1 Thessalonians 5:12 utilises another term, προΐστημι ('to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, be at the head (of)'), for church leaders in Thessaloniki.[23] The author of 1 Timothy associates this verb with ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:4) and πρεσβύτερος (1 Tim 5:17), and Romans uses προΐστημι in a discussion of the one body of Christ, in which members have different gifts. In the latter case, Christians may have gifts of prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership (προΐστημι), or mercy (Rom 12:6–8).

The book of Hebrews speaks of those leading over you, using a participial form of the word ἡγέομαι (Heb 13:17).[24] The author commands Christians to 'obey your leaders (ἡγούμενος) and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will give an account' (Heb 13:17). The idea here of 'keeping watch' (ἀγρυπνέω) resonates closely with the verb 'to oversee' (ἐπισκοπέω).

Priesthood in New Testament Church Polity

A final crucial note on New Testament ecclesiology, before turning to early patristic writings, is to observe that the New Testament does not attest to a Christian office of priest.[25] The Greek noun ἱερεῖς (priest), rather than signifying a church office or church leader in the New Testament, applies to all followers of Christ. In the apocalyptic vision of Revelation, Jesus makes all Christians into 'a kingdom and priests serving our God' (Rev 5:10). Revelation also employs ἱερεῖς to describe all Christians as a 'kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' (Rev 1:6) and 'priests of God and of Christ' (Rev 20:6). Similarly, 1 Peter uses the cognate ἱεράτευμα (priesthood) twice, the only time it occurs in the New Testament, to describe all Christians forming a 'holy priesthood' and 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:4–9).

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[23] BDAG, p. 870, s.v. 'προΐστημι'.

[24] Danker defines ἡγέομαι as 'to be in a supervisory capacity, *lead, guide*'. BDAG, p. 434, s.v. 'ἡγέομαι'.

[25] For a list of terms, such as priest, that are not used in the New Testament to describe ecclesiastical leadership, see Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1961), p. 171.

Early Christian Ecclesiology outside of the New Testament

Plural Leadership and Two-Tiered Church Polity[26]

The earliest surviving textual information about Christian ecclesiology outside the New Testament comes from the *Didache* and *1 Clement*. Both documents include a two-tier model of plural local church governance.

The *Didache*, or 'The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles', is one of the earliest surviving non-canonical writings of Christianity.[27] Dating to the late first or early second century, the letter is a collection of instructions about Christian living and worship. It discusses bishops (ἐπίσκοπος) and deacons, but not elders (πρεσβύτερος), in a single brief section. The text enjoins local churches to appoint bishops and deacons. Both words are plural in the text, though that plurality could be within a congregation or across congregations in one locale. These officers of the church should be 'worthy of the Lord', 'humble', 'true', 'approved', and 'not avaricious' (*Did.* 15:1). The latter qualification recalls requirements for bishops in 1 Timothy 3:3 ('not a lover of money') and elders/bishops in Titus 1:7 ('not greedy for gain').

However, the *Didache* devotes significantly more space to discussing apostles and prophets than bishops and deacons. The peripatetic apostles it describes are not explicitly vested with ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, apostles who remain in one location or church for over two days are 'false prophets' (*Did.* 11:5). Such short stays suggest that apostleship was not a congregational office in the mind of the *Didache's* author.

By contrast, prophets could choose to remain in one place. The text also describes prophets as having a similar status, at least in one regard, to high priests: Christians must give the first fruits of 'every possession' (e.g. sheep, oxen, wine, honey, oil, money, and clothing)

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[26] This section does not treat the office of pastor because little evidence exists for such an office in early patristic writings. When the words ποιμήν or ποιμαίνω occur in relation to church polity, they describe the work of, for example, bishops rather than a distinct leadership position (Ign. *Phil.* 2).

[27] Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edn (Baker Academic, 2007), p. 337.

either to prophets or, if a church has no prophets, to the poor (*Did.* 13:3–5). This injunction begins with, 'But every genuine prophet is worthy of his food. Likewise, every genuine teacher is, like the worker, worthy of his food' (*Did.* 13:1). This text echoes 1 Timothy, which states, 'Let the workers who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching […] The labourer deserves to be paid' (1 Tim 5:17–18).

On the one hand, the *Didache* paints a somewhat opaque and chaotic picture of church polity. The distinction between bishop, deacon, apostle, and prophet is unclear. Each of these positions teaches. Apostles are, at times, labelled prophets. Bishops and deacons, the text states, also 'carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers' (*Did.* 15:2). Moreover, the document does not specify how bishops and deacons relate to apostles and prophets from the perspective of church governance. On the other hand, the *Didache* issues a seemingly universal injunction for all churches to appoint bishops and deacons. It does not issue a similar command regarding apostles or prophets. Additionally, echoes exist between the treatment of bishops in the *Didache* and that of bishops and elders in the Pastoral Epistles. Taken as a whole, the text of the *Didache* describes a situation closer to the two-tiered church polity evident in numerous New Testament pericopes than the three-tiered model visible in the second-century writings of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp (see below).

Another candidate for the earliest surviving extra-canonical Christian writing is the epistle known as *1 Clement*. Clement, a leader in the early Christian church in Rome, likely wrote the letter to the church in Corinth sometime in the last decade of the first century CE.[28] Michael W. Holmes, a New Testament scholar and translator of the Apostolic Fathers, cautions against the traditional identification of Clement as *the* Bishop of Rome. He writes, tradition 'identifies him as the third bishop of Rome after Peter, but this is unlikely because the office of monarchical bishop, in the sense intended by this later tradition, does not appear to have existed in Rome at this time. Leadership seems to

[28] Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 35–36.

have been entrusted to a group of presbyters or bishops.'[29] The text of *1 Clement* supports Holmes's analysis of Clement's leadership position.

The two-tiered structure of church polity, as seen in several New Testament books, also occurs in *1 Clement* with bishops and deacons. The letter uses ἐπίσκοπος four times. In the first three cases, Clement describes the Apostles appointing bishops alongside deacons (*1 Clem.* 42.4 and 42.5, twice). In this text, both leadership categories consist of multiple individuals serving simultaneously. The other instance of ἐπίσκοπος (*1 Clem.* 59.3) does not relate to ecclesiastical leadership but rather describes God as a 'guardian'. Additionally, Clement uses the cognate ἐπισκοπή twice to denote the office of bishop or bishopric (*1 Clem.* 44.1 and 44.4), which he describes as a perpetual office (*1 Clem.* 44.1). A third occurrence of ἐπισκοπή comes in the statement, 'the kingdom of Christ *visits* us' (*1 Clem.* 50.3).

1 Clement also contains eight occurrences of the word πρεσβύτερος (elder). The first three of these instances indicate old age (*1 Clem.* 1.3, 3.3, and 21.6), and one usage refers to Jewish leaders during the time of Judith (*1 Clem.* 55.4). The other four uses of πρεσβύτερος signify church leaders (*1 Clem.* 44.4, 47.6, 54.2, and 57.1). In the first example, the text appears to equate πρεσβύτερος (*1 Clem.* 44.4) with ἐπίσκοπος (*1 Clem.* 44.1–3). Another occurrence of πρεσβύτερος comes in the context of Clement condemning the rebellion of certain Christians against church leaders. He addresses such a rebellion several times, describing the church leaders in two different accounts as πρεσβύτερος (*1 Clem.* 47.6) and ἐπίσκοπος (*1 Clem.* 57.1). Additionally, all four pericopes in which Clement employs πρεσβύτερος in the context of church leadership use the word in a plural form.

Therefore, *1 Clement* articulates a two-tiered church leadership structure with pluralities of elders/bishops and pluralities of deacons serving simultaneously (*1 Clem.* 42:4–5). However, the letter could be describing a single congregation with multiple elders/bishops or a context in which multiple Corinthian house churches each had a single

[29] Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 34.

bishop/elder (or multiple house churches each with multiple bishops/elders). The latter possibility is a federated ecclesiological model in which a group of elders/bishops governs a particular city or region. Yet historians of early Christianity see little evidence of multiple house churches unified into a 'single socio-political body within a city' until the third century. As such, the plurality of elders/bishops in Corinth described by Clement likely signifies a group of leaders exercising authority together over a single Corinthian congregation.[30]

Clement of Rome is also associated with the early Christian document known as *2 Clement*, even though he was likely not its author. The writing, dating to sometime between the late first and mid-second century, is the earliest preserved Christian sermon outside the New Testament.[31] On the topic of church polity, the author states, 'And let us think about paying attention and believing not only now, while we are being admonished by the elders (πρεσβύτερος), but let us also remember the Lord's commands when we have returned home' (*2 Clem.* 17.3). This admonition supports the pattern of plural teaching eldership in early Christianity.

The *Shepherd of Hermas*, likely written in the second century CE, also contains information about Clement and the early Roman church. While church polity is not a central theme of the writing, it contains several passages with insight into the subject. In one pericope, an older woman, who personifies the church, instructs the author to 'read [*Shepherd of Hermas*] to this city, along with the elders (πρεσβύτερος) who preside over the church' (Bk. I, vis. 2, ch. 4 v. 3). A structure in which elders (πρεσβύτερος) 'preside over' (προΐστημι) the church recalls several New Testament passages in which προΐστημι describes the activity of ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:4) and πρεσβύτερος (1 Tim 5:17).

The *Shepherd of Hermas* also employs the term ἐπίσκοπος in two passages and also ἐπίσκοπεω in one of those passages. In the passage

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[30] Karen Jo Torjesen, 'Clergy and Laity', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies,* ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 389–405 (p. 398).

[31] Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 133–135.

where both forms are present, the church appears as a tower composed of various categories of stones, representing several categories of Christians. White square stones, which fit neatly together, signify the 'apostles and bishops [ἐπίσκοπος] and teachers and deacons' (Bk I, vis. 3, ch. 5, v. 1). Notably, the word πρεσβύτερος does not appear in this discussion of church leadership. The term ἐπίσκοπος also occurs in a parable/similitude of the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Bk III, sim. 9, ch. 27). However, this passage says little about the office except that believing bishops (ἐπίσκοπος) are those who act hospitably and serve widows and other persons in need, echoing the description of bishops from the vision addressed above.

In summary, the *Shepherd of Hermas* attests a variety of ecclesiastical leadership roles, including apostle, bishop, teacher, elder, and deacon. It also suggests that a plural body of elders ruled the church. Thus, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, while not offering a clear or detailed picture of ecclesiastical offices, appears to indicate that a monarchical episcopal structure had not yet emerged in the Roman church by the time it was written.

The Mono-Episcopacy

The writings of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, early martyrs of the Christian faith, are essential for the study of early Christian polity. Ignatius (late first/early second century CE) wrote sometime before his martyrdom, which almost certainly occurred during the second half of the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan (98–117 CE). These texts contain the earliest known unambiguous example of a three-tiered church leadership structure. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Ignatius writes, 'For your council of presbyters [πρεσβύτερος], which is worthy of its name and worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop [ἐπίσκοπος] as strings to a lyre', and 'Let us, therefore, be careful not to oppose the bishop [ἐπίσκοπος], in order that we may be obedient to God […] It is obvious, therefore, that we must regard the bishop [ἐπίσκοπος] as the Lord himself' (Ign. *Eph.* 4.1 and 5.3b–6.1). One of the more startling passages of Ignatius's church polity occurs in a letter to the church in Smyrna in which he states,

> You must all follow the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) as Jesus Christ followed the Father […] wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church […] it is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil. (Ign. *Smyrn.* 8.1–9.1)

Ignatius articulates a highly hierarchical, even authoritarian, view of the bishopric throughout the corpus of his writings.[32] Two points related to ecclesiastical offices stand out from the writings of Ignatius. First, his use of the Greek words πρεσβύτερος (elder) and ἐπίσκοπος (overseer or bishop) departs from those of Luke, Paul, James, Peter, the *Didache*, and Clement. Second, one church to which Ignatius wrote, Ephesus, is known to have had a two-tiered structure of leadership during the New Testament period. Therefore, at least in this city, an apparent change occurred in the structure of church polity between the New Testament period and the time of Ignatius's letters.

Polycarp of Smyrna (late first to mid-second century CE) like Ignatius, went by the title of 'bishop' (ἐπίσκοπος). In a letter written to Polycarp, Ignatius regards him as the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) of Smyrna, distinct from the elders (πρεσβύτερος) and deacons. Likewise, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* describes him as 'bishop of the holy church in Smyrna' (*Mart. Pol.* 16.2). This text uses a singular form of the word ἐπίσκοπος without a definite article. It does not provide clear evidence for singular or plural episcopacy, as anarthrous Greek nouns can be definite or indefinite depending on the immediate linguistic context. However, in the only surviving letter written by Polycarp himself, *Polycarp to the Philippians*, he discusses the offices of elder (πρεσβύτερος) (Pol. *Phil.* 6.1; 11.1–2) and deacon (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2) but does not address the office of bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) at all. At the beginning of that letter, he introduces himself as 'Polycarp and the presbyters with him' (Pol. *Phil.* Intro). This phrase could indicate that Polycarp was either an elder, possibly a *primus inter pares*, or stood apart from the body of elders. Additionally, Polycarp described Ignatius as 'blessed' (Pol. *Phil.* 9.1) and

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[32] Ign. *Magn.* 3.1, 7.13.2; *Trall.* 2.2, 3.1, 7.2; *Phil.* 1.1, 3.2, 4.1, 7.2; *Smyrn.* 8.1–9.1; *Pol.* Intro., 4.1, 5.2, 6.1.

endorsed his letters to the Philippians for their spiritual edification (Pol. *Phil.* 13.2). Taken together, the evidence related to Polycarp suggests that he was, at the very least, not opposed to mono-episcopal church governance and that he was likely either a singular bishop or the leading elder.

Later Patristic Texts on Church Leadership

Several additional Patristic writings, dating later than those discussed above, shed valuable light on the ecclesiastical leadership structures of the early church. We briefly highlight four such writings from the late second to the fourth centuries CE. In *Against Heresies* (c. 180 CE), Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lugdunum (modern Lyon, France), appears to have used the Greek words ἐπίσκοπος and πρεσβύτερος interchangeably to describe a plural leadership position in the church (Iren. *Haer.* 4.26.5; see also 3.14.2;). He also asserts that elders succeeded the apostles (Iren. *Haer.* 4.26.2). The *Apostolic Tradition,* possibly written by Hippolytus of Rome in the early third century CE, purports to offer a detailed account of the ecclesiastical practices of the Roman church. The writing describes an ecclesiastical structure consisting of one bishop with authority over a council of elders and a group of deacons. Additionally, the *Apostolic Tradition's* description of the process for ordaining a new bishop suggests that a degree of federation existed across churches. Bishops, but not elders, from other locations were to lay their hands on the new bishop (*Apost. Trad.* 2:1–5). Another likely third-century text, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* or 'Teaching of the Apostles', modelled on the *Didache,* articulates a four-part church governance structure consisting of one bishop with pluralities of elders (also called teachers), deacons, and subdeacons. At times, the text describes the bishop as something approaching a *primus inter pares* among the elders (e.g. *Didasc.* ch. IV).[33] Additionally, as in the *Apostolic Tradition*, the instructions for ordaining a bishop in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* include a noteworthy element of federation: bishops from nearby churches lay hands on the new bishop (*Didasc.* ch. III).

[33] The *Didascalia Apostolorum* also uses the term 'pastor' or 'shepherd' to describe bishops (*Didasc.* chs. III, IV; see also X) and possibly also to describe elders (*Didasc.* ch. XV; see also X).

Unity as the Motive for the Emergence of Mono-Episcopal Governance?

The motivation for the shift from plural to mono-episcopal leadership in early Christian churches is a crucial question. Though any answer must be tentative and incomplete, evidence suggests that the drive for unity in the face of threats to the institutional church played a significant role. Consolidation and centralisation of authority likely arose from a concern that division, especially in the context of heresy, would weaken the church.[34]

Ignatius, the strongest early advocate of mono-episcopal governance, exhibited deep anxiety regarding division within the church. His *Letter to the Ephesians* enjoins readers to pursue harmony and unity while also advocating obedience to the bishop as if to Christ. This epistle articulates a cascading chain of harmony from the mind of God to the mind of Christ, to the mind of the bishop, and to the minds of Christians under the bishop's authority. Ignatius also invoked harmony in a passage including elders or presbyters, when he wrote,

> Thus it is proper for you to run together in harmony with the mind of the bishop, as you are in fact doing. For your council of presbyters, which is worthy of its name and worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre. Therefore, in your unanimity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung.[35]

The inference seems to be that a presbytery worthy of God should align fully with its bishop. Shortly thereafter, the *Epistle to the Ephesians* links obedience to the bishop with maintaining order and avoiding heresy. In that passage, Ignatius declared that Christians must regard bishops as they would the Lord himself.[36] Heretical doctrine is also a theme in his

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[34] In addition, the Roman Empire, in certain times and places, exerted immense pressure on early Christians that had numerous effects on the church, likely including consolidation of authority. Ignatius of Antioch experienced Roman tyranny in the extreme, being executed for his Christian faith in the first decade of the second century CE. Pliny the Younger, also during the reign of Trajan, famously wrote a letter to the emperor contemplating a variety of questions and punishments for Christians.

[35] Ign. *Eph.* 4:1. Similarly, Ignatius's *Letter to the Magnesians* (6:1–2, 7:1) links the unity of the Father and Son with the unity in the church amongst the bishop, presbyters, and deacons.

[36] Ign. *Eph.* 6:1–2.

Letter to the Romans, where Ignatius urged unity at the eucharistic table, presided over by the bishop, in the face of schismatics.[37]

Later in the second century, Irenaeus also linked the struggle against heresies, the title of his most famous writing, to ecclesiastical structure. He rejected the Gnostic idea of secret knowledge, as well as the related teaching that the true God is neither the God of the Hebrew Scriptures nor the creator of the material cosmos. Irenaeus's argument against Gnosticism appealed to apostolic succession via a mono-episcopal structure. The church in Rome, preeminent in authority according to him, gained its status through association with its founders, the apostles Peter and Paul. The subsequent purportedly unbroken line of singular bishops (from Linus to Anacletus to Clement, and so on to Eleutherius, the twelfth Bishop of Rome in succession, who was leading the church when Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies*), authoritative heirs of the testimony and teachings of the apostles, refuted key Gnostic doctrines in their public teachings. For example, Irenaeus specifically referred to *1 Clement*, Clement's letter to the Corinthian church, which contradicts Gnostic conceptions of God.[38] That the letter of a singular and authoritative bishop of the Roman church opposed ideas linked to Gnostic heresies was robust evidence for Irenaeus.

Finally, a text from Jerome of Stridon, author of the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, further supports several arguments of this article. His *Commentary on the Epistle of Titus* states,

> Hence a presbyter is the same as a bishop, and before ambition came into religion, by the prompting of the devil, and people began to say: 'I belong to Paul; I to Apollo; I to Cephas', the churches were governed by the direction of presbyters, acting as a body. But when each presbyter began to suppose that those whom he had baptized belonged to him, rather than to Christ, it was decreed in the whole Church that one of the presbyters should be chosen to preside over the others, and that the whole responsibility for the Church should devolve on him, so that the seeds of schism should be removed.[39]

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[37] Ign. *Rom.* 3:2–3.

[38] Iren. *Haer.* 3.3.

[39] *The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 189.

Though written in the late fourth century CE, this historical sketch aligns with significant evidence from early Christian texts, discussed above, for the emergence of mono-episcopal church governance from a plural presbytery/episcopate. Additionally, in this passage, Jerome directly linked the rise of mono-episcopacy to the goal of preventing ecclesiastical schism.

Conclusion

Several essential features of church polity emerge from our review of New Testament and early patristic writings. First, a distinction between the offices of elder and bishop is not visible in the New Testament. The mono-episcopacy, with a sharp delineation between these two positions, first comes to light in the life of Ignatius of Antioch. Additionally, elders/bishops, rather than 'pastors' occupying a separate office, pastored or shepherded God's people. On that note, little evidence exists for the office of pastor or shepherd in the first several centuries of the church. Fourth, a prevailing organisational pattern of early Christianity was the practice of shared leadership. Church polity often entailed a group of people, described as bishops and elders, leading a congregation simultaneously. Alternatively, leaders of congregations may have operated together in loose-knit federations. Perhaps, both shared governance practices existed in much of Christendom in the first several centuries.

These early patterns of church polity provide guidance and encouragement in the face of common weaknesses in contemporary ecclesiology. The plural leadership model raises doubts about paradigms in which singular, at times ego-centric, and at times overburdened pastors or priests dominate congregations. Yet the message of this article is not to view a particular ecclesiological structure as the only theologically defensible position (multiple models existed even in the New Testament era), or as the solution to all the leadership challenges of contemporary congregational life. Instead, we argue that shared leadership was a prominent feature in the New Testament and the early Christian church. As such, mutuality and accountability among Christian leaders are essential. This point also resonates with New Testament

teaching on mutual encouragement (Rom 1:12) and mutual submission (Eph 5:21). Lastly, the plural or shared leadership model reminds us of Dunn's exhortation, cited above, that the mission and service of the church is not 'the special ministry of a few', but the joy and responsibility of all followers of Christ.

'Living the Good News': An Assessment of the Significance and Impact of the 23rd Baptist World Congress

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Abstract
The twenty-third World Congress of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) took place on 7–12 July 2025 in Brisbane, Australia. The Congress theme was 'Living the Good News' (Luke 4:18–19), inviting participants to explore the following questions: How do we live the good news in today's world? How can we effectively proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind? How can we set the oppressed free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour? How can we work together to achieve this? What can we learn to take back to our own settings? This article explores the Congress's programming and key themes, identifies new organisational developments and initiatives, and considers the significance of the event in light of the 120-year-old journey of the BWA. Although no new statements or resolutions were proposed or passed in Brisbane, attention is paid to how the Congress heard and applied the rich corpus of resolutions and statements that the BWA has adopted throughout its history.

Keywords
Baptist World Alliance (BWA); congress; resolutions; mission

Baptists Gather in Brisbane, Australia

The global Baptist family gathered in person (and virtually) for the 23rd World Congress of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) on 7–12 July 2025, in Brisbane, Australia.[1] Due to Covid-19, the prior (22nd) Congress, originally scheduled to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2020, was reconfigured to be an online only event.

[1] The author, in his capacity as BWA Historian, attended the Congress in person.

Brisbane was the fourth Asian venue for a Congress, with prior ones taking place in Tokyo (12th Congress, 1970), Seoul (16th Congress, 1990), and Melbourne (18th Congress, 2000). Excluding the 2020 virtual meeting, eight of the Congresses have been held in North America (United States/Canada), seven in Europe, two in South America, and one in Africa.

Congress registration data received from the Baptist World Alliance office reveals that 4405 people registered for the Brisbane Congress, with 4101 intending to participate in person and an additional 304 people joining online. By way of comparison, the 21st Congress (2015), held in Durban, South Africa, reported 2620 registered participants, with an additional 475 attendees who purchased day passes (3095 in total).[2] However, the previous two Asian venues attracted significantly larger numbers. A total of 10 238 participants came to the Melbourne Congress in 2000 (5695 delegates; 3619 day/evening guests; and 864 others).[3] In 1990, 10 687 people registered and attended the Congress in Seoul, where 6900 Korean Baptists hosted 3787 attendees from around the world.[4]

In Brisbane, 3764 people actually attended the 2025 Congress (3460 in person and 304 virtual). The difference between registered (4101) and actual attendees — 641 individuals — was due to an unexpectedly large number of visa denials by the Australian government. All but one (from Ukraine) of the denials involved prospective delegates from Africa and Asia. Three hundred and sixty-six (366) Africans (from 13 countries) and 274 Asians (from 13 countries) were denied entry into the country. The top five denials by country were India (138), Congo (100), Nigeria (84), Burundi (51), and Myanmar (41).

Registered Congress delegates represented 123 countries and territories (89 in person, 74 virtual). Due to visa denials, those in

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[2] *Jesus Christ the Door: Official Report of the Twenty-first Baptist World Congress, Durban, South Africa, July 22–26, 2015*, ed. by Eron Henry (Baptist World Alliance, 2015), pp. 105–106.

[3] *Jesus Christ Forever, Yes!: Official Report of the Eighteenth Baptist World Congress, Melbourne, Australia, January 5–9, 2000*, ed. by Wendy E. Ryan (Baptist World Alliance, 2000), pp. 195–196.

[4] *Together in Christ: Official Report of the Sixteenth Congress, Seoul, Korea, August 14–19, 1990*, ed. by Wendy E. Ryan (Baptist World Alliance, 1990), pp. 165–167.

attendance represented 118 countries and territories (84 in person, 74 virtual). As would be expected, the largest delegation was from the host country of Australia, with 1769 participants (1712 in person, 57 virtual). The five largest international delegations were from the United States (571 in person, 61 virtual), South Korea (159 in person, 1 virtual), India (152 in person, 4 virtual), Papua New Guinea (134 in person), and New Zealand (119 in person, 4 virtual). The largest European Baptist Federation-related delegations came from the United Kingdom (37 in person, 9 virtual), Norway (22 in person), and Denmark (19 in person, 2 virtual). Other significant delegations came from Jamaica (53 in person, 10 virtual), Kenya (52 in person, 4 virtual), Nigeria (43 in person, 11 virtual), and Brazil (28 in person, 8 virtual).

Women constituted a slight majority of both in-person attendees and online viewers. Of the 3460 people in Brisbane, 1825 were female (52.75%) and 1644 were male (47.25%). Online viewership was slightly more even — 156 women (51.32%) and 148 men (48.68%). A majority of attendees were 45 or more years old (64.76%).

Congress Overview

On the three days prior to the start of the Congress, a full slate of courses and experiences were organised for attendees. Two-day summits were intended specifically for women and young people. A mission conference and experience, a BWAid symposium, and an Aboriginal cultural experience rounded out the offering. Throughout the Congress, ancillary special meetings abounded: Bible studies, a preaching symposium, regional gatherings, breakouts and affinity groups, sessions for children and teens, and a prayer room were among the offerings each day.

The plenary sessions were marked by a wide variety of worship experiences, from contemporary to more traditional, and highlighted several distinctive cultural backgrounds — from Korean to African-American. In the opening plenary on Wednesday evening, the flags of the nations pageant highlighted the global reach and diversity of the

BWA family and inspired the assembly. The General Secretary's speech will be discussed in a later section.

Female Baptist leaders played a prominent role throughout the plenary sessions and in other Congress settings. During the Thursday morning plenary session, Dr. Linda A. Livingstone, President of Baylor University, shared the podium with the General Secretary and celebrated Baylor University's membership in the Alliance. The Friday plenary sessions featured four speakers: Dr Jennifer Lau (Executive Director of Canadian Baptist Ministries) and Kay Warren (co-founder of Saddleback Church) in the morning, and Ms. Amanda Khosi Mukwashi (United Nations Resident Coordinator in the Kingdom of Lesotho) and Revd Marsha Scipio (Director of Baptist World Aid) in the evening plenary. In addition, many women served as Bible study leaders and preachers throughout the Congress, including Revd Lynn Green (General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain) and Revd Karen Wilson (President, Baptist World Alliance Women). A highlight of the Congress was the awarding of the BWA Human Rights Award to Sano Vamuzo (of Nagaland) in honour of her social work, advocacy, and peace-making endeavours.[5]

The contributions of these leaders to the Congress's programme were substantial and at times, prophetically challenging. As the founder of *Hope for Brighter Tomorrows*,[6] Kay Warren brought to the forefront the issue of how the church can serve and bring healing to families impacted by mental health challenges. Jennifer Lau declared that Baptists should respond to the world's needs not as 'bystanders', but rather as Christ-followers seeking to be 'neighbours to those on the margins'.[7]

Based on 1 Corinthians 7:4–11, Marsha Scipio urged Baptists to embrace a 'path forward' that is characterised by 'truth-telling' even

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[5] See 'Around the World: BWA Presents Human Rights Award', *Baptist Standard,* 23 July 2025 <https://baptiststandard.com/news/world/around-the-world-bwa-presents-human-rights-award/> [accessed 10 October 2025].

[6] See the website for further information <https://www.hopeforbrightertomorrows.org> [accessed 13 November 2025].

[7] Quoted in 'Global Baptists Challenged To Live the Gospel', *Baptist Standard*, 14 July 2025 <https://baptiststandard.com/news/baptists/global-baptists-challenged-to-live-the-gospel/> [accessed 10 October 2025].

when it might involve 'difficult, even painful consequences', because 'it can also be a catalyst for transformation and ultimately justice'. Living in 'perilous times' demands that we speak 'prophetic truth'. She declared, 'We as the church will not be paralyzed by the proliferation of the peril, because God still presides over God's world, Jesus still prays for us at God's right hand; and the Holy Spirit still has power.' Bolstered by divine empowerment, like the Apostle Paul, contemporary followers of Jesus may speak the truth 'with great frankness'. She noted that

> the BWA has gathered in perilous times before. In 1934, Congress was held in Berlin as Nazism began to rear its ugly head in Europe. In 1939 the BWA Congress met in Atlanta where segregation and racism were at its peak in the United States […] My point is BWA has met in the midst of perilous times before. My prayer is that as a global Baptist family, we take up the mantle of truth telling, of frank speech, of prophetic speech, and trust that God would lead us through these perilous times.[8]

The Alliance's Ministry Emphases

Each World Congress marks the beginning of a new quinquennium for the commissions of the BWA. The work of the commissions is organised by the primary ministry areas as delineated by the Constitution and By-Laws.[9] With continuing and new leadership, as needed, commissions are tasked with addressing these following themes:

> *A. Strengthen worship, fellowship, and unity:* Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Christian Unity; Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity; Commission on Worship and Prayer.
>
> *B. Lead in mission and evangelism:* Commission on Evangelism and Discipleship; Commission on Faith and Business; Commission on Strategic Cities and Least Reached People Groups.

[8] All message quotations are from Revd Scipio's manuscript, 'A Path Forward – Frank Words' and used with her permission. The message is also summarized in 'Global Baptists Challenged To Live the Gospel', *Baptist Standard*.
[9] BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (Baptist World Alliance, 2024), p. 35.

C. Respond through aid, relief, and community development: Commission on Humanitarian Aid and Community Development; Commission on Racial, Gender, and Economic Justice.

D. Defend religious freedom, human rights, and justice: Commission on Human Rights, Peacebuilding, and Reconciliation; Commission on Religious Freedom; Commission on Safeguarding.

E. Advance theological reflection and transformational leadership: Commission on Faith and Technology; Commission on Healthy Churches; Commission on Multifaith Relations.

In the 2026–2030 quinquennium, commissions are expected to gather at least annually as part of the Global Council meetings. Additionally, departments, initiatives, and ministries of the BWA also support the advancement of the primary ministry areas. These include Baptist Men, Women and Youth; the Acts 2 Movement; the Global Baptist Mission Forum; the Baptist Forum for Aid and Development (BFAD); Baptist World Aid (BWAid); and 21Wilberforce.[10]

BWA's Reorganisation and Resolutions

In July 2024, The General Council approved a revision of the BWA's Constitution and By-Laws which created a new multi-level organisational structure. In order to involve more voices from around the world in the BWA's deliberations, and in light of the growth of Baptist denominations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, a three-fold leadership structure was approved. Beginning with the 2025 World Congress, the new structure is now in place.

The *Trustee Committee* 'will champion and provide governance in relation to BWA legal and fiduciary responsibilities through missional, pastoral, integrated, and holistic engagement'.[11] It will ordinarily have little interaction with the Resolutions Committee.

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[10] 21Wilberforce became a part of the BWA in 2020. Its mission is to help the global Baptist family (and others) 'stand with the persecuted and defend the freedom of religion and belief'. See their website <https://21wilberforce.org/our-story/> [accessed 18 November 2025].
[11] BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 2.

It is the responsibility of the new *Leadership Council* to 'champion and provide governance to those areas that pertain to the BWA mission, vision, and strategic impact in the world'.[12] As part of its work, it will oversee the work of the Resolutions Committee and other standing committees.[13]

The new *Global Council* is intended to be a conversational space that

> affirms the identity of the Baptist movement as a worldwide family. The Global Council celebrates and gives thanks for what God has achieved, and is achieving, through the life and work of the Partners of the BWA and seeks to be open to God's prophetic word to us. The Global Council nurtures intentional representation of godliness, geography, gender, generation, and giftedness, and deepens fellowship among us.[14]

The Global Council will meet annually and has the potential to at least double the size of the General Council it replaces. It is comprised of representatives of all Member Partners. Representation by those Member Partners on the Global Council is defined as follows:

> Each Member Partner whose own membership is defined by churches and church members will be entitled to representation on the Global Council:
>
> One (1) for each Member Partner of up to 40,000 church members.
>
> Two (2) for each Member Partner with 40,001 or more church members up to 200,000.
>
> Three (3) for each Member Partner with 200,001 or more church members up to 1,000,000.
>
> Four (4) for each Member Partner with over 1,000,001 church members.
>
> Member Partners with 5,000,001 or more members may appoint four (4) representatives and one (1) additional representative for each full million above 5,000,001 up to a maximum of seven (7) representatives.
>
> Each Member Partner whose own membership is defined other than by churches and church members will be entitled to appoint one (1) representative to the Global Council.[15]

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12 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 14.
13 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 26.
14 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 10.
15 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 11.

Most interesting is the additional clause encouraging partners to appoint up to three additional representatives based on diversity criteria:

> All Member Partners may also appoint up to three (3) additional representatives to the Global Council, provided that they are one each of: (1) a female; (2) a layperson; and (3) a person under the age of thirty-five (35) at the time of their appointment.[16]

In this new arrangement, resolutions will be considered for adoption by the Global Council.[17]

There is no provision in the 2024 Constitution and By-Laws for future World Congresses to process or approve statements or resolutions.[18] However, during the first century of the Baptist World Alliance, resolutions and other statements were proposed, debated, and voted on for adoption at World Congresses. Excluding 'messages' passed at the 2005 and 2010 Congresses, the last set of resolutions were approved at the 18th World Congress in Melbourne, Australia, in 2000.[19]

Since 1976, the BWA General Council (the predecessor of the newly established Global Council) has taken the lead in considering and approving resolutions.[20] In 2015, the General Council accepted a paper on resolutions affirming the following:

> 1. The diverse worldwide Baptist family, represented through the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), is concerned about the contemporary religious, missional, social, cultural, political and economic issues that affect the global family.
>
> 2. One means of giving expression to the conclusions Baptists draw on issues of concern to them, and of bearing witness to this before the world, is through the preparation, adoption and sharing of resolutions proposed by

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16 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024).
17 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 10.
18 BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), pp. 28–29, 39.
19 *Official Report of the Eighteenth Baptist World Congress*, ed. by Ryan, pp. 160–163. See also *Good News for the World: Baptist World Alliance Resolutions and Statements 1905–2023*, ed. by Lee B. Spitzer (Baylor University Press, 2025), pp. 183–187. Throughout this article, resolutions and statements cited by name may be found in the encyclopedia and online at the BWA's resolutions database <https://baptistworld.org/resolutions/> [accessed 13 November 2025].
20 In 2022, the BWA Executive Committee passed two statements, one on *Ukraine* (2022–03.1) and a second on *Restorative Racial Justice* (2022–07.1).

> member bodies, commissions, etc., for approval by the BWA General Council.
>
> 3. BWA's approach to framing resolutions is informed by biblical teaching and predicated on Baptists' trinitarian faith. The resolutions are shaped by the values and convictions generally affirmed by Baptists and are proposed by members of the Baptist family, or by the Resolutions Committee, which also considers, reviews and amends them where necessary for presentation to the General Council for consideration and possible adoption.[21]

According to the new constitution, the Resolutions Committee is tasked with 'bringing resolutions to the Global Council for consideration […] All resolutions to be considered by the Global Council must be proposed to the Resolutions Committee or originated by the Resolutions Committee following the values, guidelines, and process outlined in the Resolutions Committee Charter.'[22]

Although no resolutions were proposed for consideration to the 2025 World Congress, a new resource was introduced to the Baptist family during the event. Baylor University Press has published *Good News for the World: Baptist World Alliance Resolutions and Statements 1905–2023* (Spitzer, 2025), and as the title indicates, this encyclopedia contains the text of 422 resolutions, statements, sermons, and messages that were created and adopted by the BWA's World Congresses, General Council, and Executive Committee. It aims to serve as a standard reference work for historians, Baptist theologians and scholars, Baptist denominational and missional leaders, and clergy who seek to appreciate and share the global Baptist family's pastoral and prophetic perspectives on key religious, social, and political issues.

The encyclopedia is also intended to serve as a fundamental resource for the commissions as they address the primary ministry areas and are tasked with offering proposed resolutions in the 2026–2030 quinquennium for consideration by the Resolutions Committee and adoption by the Global Council. Proposed resolutions are expected to

[21] 2015 BWA General Council Baptist World Alliance Resolutions Paper.
[22] BWA *Constitution and By-Laws* (2024), p. 29.

take into consideration previous resolutions the BWA has adopted, citing them as precedents and building upon them when addressing new situations.

Many of the breakout sessions during the Congress dealt with themes addressed in the corpus of BWA resolutions that have been adopted since the fellowship's inception in 1905, including human rights, indigenous peoples, mission and evangelism, restorative justice, war and peacemaking, creation care, humanitarian aid and the poor, discipleship and leadership development, slavery and human trafficking, domestic violence, worship, and prayer.

It was my privilege to participate in a breakout session with Dr Enoh Šeba (Director IBTS Amsterdam) and Dr David Starling (Morling College, Australia) that focused on the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. Baptists have a complicated relationship with the historic creeds of the ancient church. Throughout the past four centuries, Baptists have sought to claim kinship and identify with the historical church (orthodoxy) while resisting any ecclesiastical or dogmatic binding or coercive authority that might limit Baptist soul freedom and conscience. The history of the BWA reflects this tension; over the past 120 years, BWA Congress speeches and resolutions affirmed many truths and doctrines expressed in the historic ecumenical creeds. These messages and resolutions implicitly acknowledge, and are in sustained and serious dialogue with, the faith Baptists share with other streams of the wider Christian family. Furthermore, although not a creedal people, many Baptists make use of creeds in worship. The Apostles' Creed was recited by the delegates during the 1905, 1955, and 2005 World Congresses. In like manner, during one of the 2025 Congress plenary sessions, outgoing President Tomas Mackey invited delegates to recite the Nicene Creed, as a worshipful expression of Baptist devotion and Christian identity.

The New Baptist World Alliance Studies Program/Center

At the BWA General Council meeting in Lagos, Nigeria (July 2024), Baylor University (BU) and Truett Seminary were welcomed as institutional members of the Baptist World Alliance. This was a

milestone in the BWA's ongoing positive relationship with both Baylor and Truett (through their affiliation with Texas Baptists). Revd Dr George W. Truett served as the fifth president of the BWA from 1934 to 1939 alongside General Secretary J. H. Rushbrooke, and he also served as a trustee of Baylor University. Truett Seminary's Revd Dr Joel Gregory was a plenary keynote speaker at the 21st Baptist World Congress (2015) held in Durban, South Africa. Dr Todd D. Still, the Dean of Truett Theological Seminary, helped lead a Baptist International Conference on Theological Education (BICTE), held in Lagos, Nigeria (2024); 136 people from 43 countries attended. Dr Doug Weaver, chair of Baylor's Department of Religion, is currently co-editing with Dr Melody Maxwell a volume of biographical chapters on BWA general secretaries, presidents, and other BWA leaders.[23]

In Brisbane, Baylor University and Truett Seminary hosted a luncheon at which Baylor's President, Dr Linda A. Livingstone, and General Secretary Elijah M. Brown signed a general memorandum of understanding on behalf of their organisations to 'serve together in a shared call to pursue the mission of God out of our Baptist identity both for the church and for the world'.[24] They, along with Dr Still, announced the creation of the Baptist World Alliance Program (with the goal of it becoming a centre) that will be located on Baylor University's campus in Waco, Texas. Significant financial support for the Program has already been raised, and the search for a Program director (a faculty appointment) will commence before the end of 2025.

The Baptist World Alliance Studies Program will seek to serve 'emerging generations of Baptist leaders (both clergy and lay) who would benefit greatly from focused education and training in Baptist history, polity, beliefs, leadership, evangelism, and integral mission that is situated within the contemporary global context'.[25] The Program will offer both non-graduate course participation certificates and a graduate-

[23] Baptist World Alliance Program/Center at Baylor University – Operated by George W. Truett Theological Seminary – *Memorandum of Understanding,* signed on 17 June 2025.
[24] Baylor University/BWA Ceremonial *Memorandum of Understanding*, signed on 10 July 2025. See also the University website <https://news.web.baylor.edu/news/story/2025/baptist-world-congress-underway-brisbane-australia> [accessed 17 November 2025].
[25] *Memorandum of Understanding,* 17 June 2025.

level BWA Global Leadership Certificate. The Program Memorandum of Understanding states,

> This certificate would consist of a series of courses designed to provide existing or emerging BWA leaders with a global perspective on foundational areas of Baptist life, mission, and leadership. Classes would be offered as online asynchronous experiences or as in-person intensive classes at BU or BU extension locations, BWA office or BWA extension locations, at BWA global or regional gatherings, or as part of BWA training in various locations around the world. Courses would be research project focused and designed to leverage student leadership and their contextualized experience.[26]

A Call to Collaborative Global Mission

In his World Congress opening plenary session message, BWA General Secretary, Revd Dr Elijah M. Brown, cast a wide-ranging vision for the entire Baptist family to accept God's call to live the good news of Jesus by embracing 'collaborative global mission'.[27] Based on an exegesis of Acts 2 and the example of the Jerusalem church's life and ministry,[28] Dr Brown encouraged the assembly to face the world's troubles with faith, determination, and the love of God:

> As we see a world filled with wars and persecution, poverty and hunger, displacement, depression, separation, and isolation, we want to live like that first church in the world, the church in Acts 2. We believe that our mundane can become God's miraculous. Our simple can become God's supernatural. Our ordinary can become extraordinary in God's Kingdom. A church without borders or boundaries, that does not give into the Babylons of this world but who believe the Word of God is powerful and alive and calls us to live as an incarnational community, disruptable disciples, freedom pursuers, anointed proclaimers, Holy Spirit disciples, who are Living the Good News, as we embody the presence of Jesus with missionary love.

Brown urged the audience to imagine Baptist congregations across the globe witnessing to the gospel: 'An Acts 2 church in action. In every neighborhood, every language, every nation, for every person.

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[26] *Memorandum of Understanding,* 17 June 2025.

[27] All quotes are from Dr Brown's message manuscript, 'A Call to Collaborative Mission', 9 July 2025. Shared with the author and used with Dr Brown's permission.

[28] See Baptist World Alliance, '2033 Acts 2 Movement' <https://acts2movement.org> [accessed 13 November 2025].

As we look to the greatest anniversary in the history of the world.' That anniversary is the 2000th-year celebration of Jesus's death and resurrection in 2033, and it serves for Brown as the inspiration for reaching new heights of Baptist witness and outreach during this pivotal time of human history: 'In light of 2033 as the greatest anniversary in the history of the world — for the first time in BWA history — we are calling every Baptist, every Baptist convention and union, every Baptist mission agency, humanitarian initiative, university and seminary, every church, every brother and sister, to pursue an unprecedented Holy Spirit-filled collaborative global mission.' This 'collaborative global mission' invites Baptist churches to embrace 'five paths' of service. Each path has an ambitious measurable goal to journey towards as 2033 draws nearer.

The Witness Path

Beginning on Pentecost, the Jerusalem Church shared the gospel with their neighbours and everyone else who would listen (Acts 2:2–4; 41). Brown asks, 'By 2033, could we work for 450 million testimonies shared? […] Global revival with a call to share half a billion personal testimonies about Jesus? Some might think how can that be possible? If all 53 million Baptists share their testimony once a year for the next 9 years, that is 450 million times. Here is the commitment: will you share your personal testimony at least once a year?'

The Bible Path

Based on Acts 2:42, this journey calls Baptists to embrace the discipline of reading at least one chapter of the Bible daily. Additionally, Brown urged Baptists to participate in efforts to create translations of the Bible for the 1159 languages that currently lack God's Word in written form. One can imagine that with the aid of emerging versions of artificial intelligence applications, progress towards this goal may very well be achievable by 2033, with or without Baptist support.

The Care Path

Citing Acts 2:44–45, Brown applauds the Jerusalem Church's 'radical' hospitality and generosity: 'They shared a common meal with one another as part of their worship as brothers and sisters and sold their

property and possessions and gave to any who had need. It was generosity that generated a movement.' He then asks, 'By 2033 could we give witness through 1 billion intentional acts of service? This is not impossible. If every Baptist helps 3 people per year, by 2033 we will reach 1 billion.'

The Freedom and Justice Path

Quoting Acts 2:46–47 and reaffirming the historic Baptist core convictions of religious freedom and liberty, the General Secretary issued a challenge to Baptists to 'stand with those who face persecution' — and specifically mentioned Nicaragua, Cuba, Myanmar, and Ukraine (at the hands of the Russian military) as countries where Baptists suffer persecution. He challenged the assembly (and by extension, the entire global Baptist family), to join a movement of one million people who will sign a 'Covenant on Religious Freedom'[29] that states 'our commitment to religious freedom for all people of all faiths or no faith and that faith can only flourish if it is not tied to nationalism, including Christian nationalism'.

The Neighbour Path

Perhaps the most creative suggestion in Brown's five-path vision is embedded in the final path. He asks, 'Can we raise up 1% of all BWA Baptists as lay chaplains for their neighborhood?' These 530 000 lay

[29] The Covenant can be found at on the Action Network website under the heading Baptist World Alliance, '2033 Acts 2 Movement, Religious Freedom Covenant' <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/global-covenant-on-freedom-of-religion-and-conscience> [accessed 17 November 2025]. On a personal note, I signed the Covenant on 14 August 2025 and was the 639th signature recorded. As of 26 October 2025, 696 signatures have been collected. Why has the response rate, especially from delegates and attendees of the Congress, been so low? Technological issues may have come into play; for example, I was unable to access the sign-up page using the QR code during the plenary, but had no issues later back at home. Perhaps some people were resistant to signing a document they had not had time to study carefully. Since the Congress, there have been some attempts to introduce the Covenant to BWA supporters via online communications and press releases, but clearly a more aggressive, systematic, and sustained approach will need to be developed if the goal of 1 million signatories is to be reached by 2033.

chaplains would seek to 'minister to their neighbors through relationship building, intercessory prayer, and acts of service and kindness as the Holy Spirit leads'.

Since this *Acts 2 Movement* and its *5 Paths* represented the Congress's specific and intentional response to the theme of 'Living the Good News', it is appropriate to assess its content, dissemination, implementation, and the practical chances for it being fulfilled by 2033.

The *evangelistic and witness* aspects of the Acts 2 Movement and its 5 Paths are supported by numerous significant statements and resolutions affirmed by the BWA's World Congresses (22), General Councils (33), and Executive Committees (10) throughout its 120-year history. In like manner, *religious freedom and liberty* has been the central focus of 28 World Congress, 33 General Council, and 15 Executive Committee statements and resolutions, while *social justice and progress* has served as the core concern of 18 World Congress, 47 General Council, and 4 Executive Committee statements and resolutions.[30] Baptists would not be surprised to hear that evangelical witness, devotion to reading the Bible, caring for one's neighbour, and promoting freedom and justice should be characteristic of Baptist spirituality and service. Accordingly, the General Secretary's proposal may be fairly interpreted as a detailed (and challenging) response to some of the historically central concerns of the global Baptist family.

What makes the 'Call to Collaborative Global Mission' historically unique is its invitation to Baptist individuals, local congregations, and denominational partners to embrace and fulfil its stated goals within a dauntingly brief time frame. Most importantly, it anticipates voluntary, and certainly not coercive, adoption and implementation. It is an aspirational call to personally represent the kingdom of God within one's ministry context in order to achieve, alongside hundreds of thousands of fellow Baptists, a collective testimony that reaches every corner of the globe.

[30] See Thematic Table of Contents in *Good News for the World*, ed. by Spitzer, for a listing of the specific documents.

Having laid out a vision for the next decade at the World Congress, the Baptist World Alliance no doubt will face many challenges as it seeks to disseminate the 'Call to Collaborative Global Mission' throughout our worldwide family. It cannot do so without the support and energetic cooperation of continental (regional), national denominational, and organisational entities that are part of the Baptist family. How else will local churches and their pastoral leadership learn of the initiative and serve in concert with it? For example, the General Secretary indicated in his Congress message that he hopes the 'first ever Baptist World 40-Day Movement for Mission from Easter to Pentecost 2026' will be launched next spring so that 'as one family we can teach through these five pathways'. Sharing this opportunity and encouraging churches in one's network to participate might exponentially increase the number of congregations that join the movement in some capacity.

Implementing the vision presents challenges as well. It is unclear what role the BWA's newly launched Leadership and Global Councils will play to promote the movement's growth and reach its goals. On a technical level, how will the BWA collect progress/participation reports from thousands of individuals, churches, agencies, and organisations that embrace the movement and its paths? This is a very complicated logistical issue. The collection and processing of an avalanche of updates could very well overwhelm the BWA office and/or the entity assigned to produce reports. A question may also be raised concerning how to utilise incoming reports. Does the BWA hope to provide statistical updates or just anecdotal examples of how the paths are being experienced?

Finally, what is the import of the anniversary date of 2033? Does it merely serve as the culmination of the movement's efforts (an end date), and thus be a celebration of whatever level of fulfilment has been achieved by the global Baptist family? How will participants in the movement be recognised and affirmed? Will the Acts 2 Movement be replaced with a new 5- or 10-year plan, or might it be extended (with modifications, no doubt)?

Conclusion

What is the significance of the 23rd World Congress of the Baptist World Alliance in light of its 120-year-old journey? From a historian's perspective, it is too soon to offer a definitive assessment. At a minimum, for example, fair-minded observers would prefer to wait until 2033, to appreciate how the Acts 2 Movement played out, was received by Baptist leaders and churches throughout the world, and to what extent the goals of the vision were reached.

Nevertheless, some preliminary observations may be offered for consideration. First, the symbolic value of meeting in Brisbane serves as a reminder that the global Baptist movement is alive and vibrant in Asia, Africa, and South America, even as it struggles to experience revival in North America and Europe. In his plenary message, General Secretary Elijah Brown noted that in the last decade, 'the BWA family has grown 32 percent', with Baptists in Africa achieving a 119% growth rate and the Asia Pacific region growing by 27%.[31]

At the conclusion of the Brisbane Congress, it was announced that the next BWA World Congress would be hosted by 'a country in Europe'. It has been two decades since a World Congress has been held in that region (the 2005 Centenary World Congress took place in Birmingham, England). However, one might wonder why the global family does not gather next in South or Central America to celebrate its 11% membership growth rate,[32] and where the BWA has not held a World Congress since 1995 (its 17th Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina). The 22nd Congress was scheduled to be in Brazil, but was cancelled as an in-person event due to Covid-19. Perhaps current political and economic challenges make it difficult for the BWA's Congress to return to Latin America at this point, but as Australia proved, visa restrictions and high travel costs are a global phenomenon, and a European venue will not be without its own challenges. On the other hand, the 2023 BWA Council met in Stavanger, Norway in concert with an inspiring EBF evangelism conference. Perhaps a witness-oriented Congress in conversation with the 5 Paths unveiled in Brisbane

[31] Brown, 'A Call to Collaborative Mission'.
[32] Brown, 'A Call to Collaborative Mission'.

might have the potential to support the so-called 'quiet revival' amongst young people (Gen Z) that is being reported in the United Kingdom and other countries in Europe.[33]

Second, the BWA's acceptance and celebration of women in ministry and leadership on all levels was amply demonstrated throughout the World Congress's week in Brisbane. As God raises up new generations of women (and men) who are called to serve and lead the global Baptist family, it is to the global Baptist family's advantage to affirm and support their ministries.

Third, the BWA's organisational realignment (Trustee Committee, Leadership Council, and Global Council) will have a significant yet presently undetermined impact on the BWA's life and productivity. Will the new structures invite more diversity of voices, more equitable influence distribution, new opportunities for friendship, and extended avenues of collaboration in ministry? Will the increases in Council size make decision-making more cumbersome and complicated, slowing down innovation and the taking of risks, or will it open up new possibilities for hearing God's voice and responding to that voice with creativity, passion, and spiritual conviction?

Fourth, by design and intention, the Brisbane gathering is the third consecutive World Congress that has not issued an official statement, resolution, message, or proclamation about Baptist identity, core convictions, or concerns, that might be shared with the global Baptist family or the non-Baptist world. While the various plenary speakers, preachers, breakout session presenters, and workshop leaders addressed aspects of the Congress's theme, 'Living the Good News', none of these presentations can claim to *represent the conviction of the delegates* regarding how God was speaking to and through the Congress. In 1990, the 16th Congress adopted the Seoul Covenant on evangelism;[34] in 2005 and 2010, Congresses in Birmingham and Honolulu respectively adopted 'messages' giving voice to Baptist

[33] See Hazel Southam, 'The Quiet Revival: Gen Z Leads Rise in Church Attendance', Bible Society <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/research/quiet-revival> [accessed 26 October 2025].
[34] 1990 BWA World Congress, *The Seoul Covenant*.

convictions regarding a panoply of issues.[35] In 2025, the Acts 2 Movement was announced and an invitation was extended to embrace it by adopting practices and disciplines to fulfil its goals, but the delegates were not given any opportunity to affirm or endorse the initiative as a whole, as an expression of the theme, 'Living the Good News'.[36] As a result, in effect the Congress community 'lost its voice' — for it approved no official statement to communicate to the Baptist family and beyond.

Accordingly, the BWA might profitably use the Brisbane 2025 experience to consider what has been both gained and lost by its decision to forego issuing (when appropriate) statements, messages, and even resolutions at World Congresses. There are several strong arguments for not including resolution-making in Congresses. The crafting of thoughtful and prophetic statements that have value and faithfully represent historic Baptist core convictions (as opposed to an influential or insistent person's particular position) in a timely manner is difficult and often truly daunting. Debates on such statements can be divisive and harmful, while the desired ideal of consensus is often beyond reach. Many delegates to World Congresses may have little familiarity with the BWA's history, practices, and positions regarding issues that are often controversial and complicated. Arguments can be made that the Leadership and Global Councils may be superior venues to process resolutions and statements that will appropriately represent the BWA's official position on issues facing the Baptist family. Nevertheless, the history of the BWA has demonstrated that resolutions and statements containing biblical perspectives, sound wisdom, prophetic value, and timely impact, even at World Congresses, can be crafted, presented, debated, and approved by delegates. In so doing, a Congress might truly speak both to Baptists and the world — and thus regain its pastoral and prophetic 'voice'.

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35 2005 BWA World Congress, *Message*; 2010 BWA World Congress, *Message*.

36 Based on my observation of the audience reactions, I believe that the delegates would have overwhelmingly approved the initiative. My analysis should not be interpreted as a criticism of the Acts 2 initiative.

Fifth, the launching of the BWA's new initiative — the Acts 2 Movement and its 5 Paths — potentially represents a profound transformation, not only within the BWA, but also in the global Baptist family's life and mission. This surprising initiative seeks to penetrate through the layers of Baptist polity (continent-region/nation/state-province/association) and enlist the energies of thousands of local churches and individual disciples to collaboratively present a varied but intentional witness — in less than a decade! For this reason (and only if the Baptist family embraces the missional call), the 23rd World Congress of the Baptist World Alliance which took place on 7–12 July 2025 in Brisbane, Australia, may very well, in time, stand alongside some of the greatest World Congresses (such as the 1905 Inaugural Congress and the 1934 Congress in Berlin), and be looked upon as a major spiritual journey milestone in the pilgrimage of the Baptist World Alliance and the global Baptist family it serves.

Book Reviews

Mark Stirling and Mark Meynell (eds), *Not So with You: Power and Leadership for the Church* (Wipf & Stock, 2023), 261 pages. ISBN: 9781666760163.

Reviewed by Einike Pilli

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'It is a tragedy for the church that this book is necessary' (p. 200). So states Mark Stirling, one of the book's two editors. The subtitle, *Power and Leadership for the Church*, partly explains why. Problems with power in leadership are not unknown in the church and need to be addressed. Addressing these issues is believed to be the best way to overcome such problems. This is the aim of the editors.

One of the editors, Mark Stirling, explains that we cannot stop using power, even though we need to use it rightly 'as those who are united with Christ and being restored in his image' (p. 13). This quotation itself illustrates the approach the editors take: it is predominantly biblical and theological, rather than exclusively psychological. It addresses possibly shared erroneous thinking rather than accusing problematic personalities. 'How we understand power […] depends on our understanding of God himself' (p. 3) expresses their conviction.

This collection of articles comes in two parts: biblical and theological foundations, and practical and pastoral reflections. As in every collection of articles, some are more inspiring and contextually relevant than others. But all help the reader to understand what has to be different from the worldly way of using power.

From the first part, one of the most theological articles in the book is written by Chris Wright, referring to the title of the book: 'You Must Not Do as They Do', but doing it from an Old Testament perspective (quoting Leviticus 18:3). He explains how Israelite society was different from others through the example of their leader, Moses. In the Old Testament, the ultimate power was God and all other leaders,

priests included, were evaluated according to their loyalty and obedience to God. This other kind of power was 'exercised on behalf of the powerless' (p. 41).

In the second, pastoral part of the book, the most relevant for me as a reader was the chapter 'Signs and Symptoms of Unhealthy Leaders and Their Systems' by Mark Stirling. He offers a helpful diagnostic question for the right use of power: does the church actively solicit feedback and is it seen to act upon it? If this is not happening, there are several signs: the leader talks about his/her own authority; those who ask questions become a problem to be managed; competitiveness develops; the church does not talk well about those who are leaving; and other possible signs. By contrast, the author lists the signs of a healthy church with godly leadership: it treats people with generosity; encourages feedback; speaks well of other churches; publicly and positively blesses those who leave; and serves other members of the body of Christ, especially when it is costly (p. 206).

Having been in church all my life helps me appreciate this book. It helps to look at power issues within the churches from a right theological perspective and to be careful even about small signs of unhealthy leadership. No church in the world is immune to these temptations, even if the types of risks are different. Using power in a godly way is a question of living with trust and integrity, and thus, is a question of living the life of God's Kingdom.

Wendy J. Porter, *Worship, Music and Interpretation: Exploratory Essays.* McMaster General Studies Series (Pickwick Publications, 2024), 442 pages. ISBN: 9798385223305.

Reviewed by Tony Peck

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This unusual volume brings together seventeen essays written over the past 25 years or so by the Professor of Music and Worship at McMaster Divinity College, Canada. It brings together her academic interests in early Greek documents and texts, and the history of music written for

the Church, as well as her experience as a worship leader in evangelical churches. This is reflected in the three sections of the book: 'Music and Interpretation in the Early Church', 'Musical Traditions and Interpretations', and 'The Past and Present of Music and Worship'. Throughout, Porter is interested in the question of how music composers may have influenced their hearers' interpretation of the Bible and sacred texts (such as those of the Mass) by the emphases of their musical settings.

In the first section, Porter deals with the tantalisingly scant evidence from the New Testament and elsewhere of how the early church may have worshipped and used music in worship. The presence of hymn-like passages (such as the one in Philippians chapter 2) raises the question of whether they were written by Paul and other authors, or whether they are quoting an established 'hymn' tradition which then may well have been set to some kind of music or chanting.

Porter admits that the 'incidental evidence' does not lead to clear conclusions, and that some of the existing scholarly hypotheses are somewhat tendentious. She comes to the judicious conclusion that early Christian worship and its music probably developed from within Judaism but was also influenced by the Greco-Roman world in which many of the earliest congregations found themselves.

In one essay Porter examines the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 14: 34–35 and makes the interesting suggestion that Paul's prohibition on women speaking in church may have something to do with a style of prophesying accompanied by a musical instrument, rather than a blanket prohibition.

In part two, chapters mainly focus on classical composers from the sixteenth to the twentieth century with some fascinating insights into the way in which they have interpreted biblical and liturgical texts. I found it rather incongruous that we then move on to a chapter on 'contemporary worship songs and suffering', followed by one on 'Chistian worship and the Toronto blessing'. But Porter casts a critical eye over contemporary worship in both contexts, making suggestions for improvement and a more balanced diet of musical worship.

I did not find totally convincing the parallels Porter draws between the work of the renowned sixteenth-century English church composer, William Byrd, and contemporary evangelical worship. I did, however, find myself in agreement with Porter's plea to write new songs to meet the present age and contemporary movements of the Spirit. I wish that she could have explored this further, in terms of songs that arise from local situations, in order to balance the 'globalisation' of much contemporary worship music.

The final chapter is a helpful summary of theological reflections on the history of Christian worship with an emphasis on songs, hymns, and choral music.

Overall, this is an interesting set of essays dealing with a subject that does not receive a lot of attention in the churches today. I recommend it for Christian leaders who want to reflect more widely, deeply, and critically on the place of music in contemporary worship.

Carlo Calleja, *Communities of Kinship: Retrieving Christian Practices of Solidarity with Lepers as a Paradigm for Overcoming Exclusion of Older People* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2024), 187 pages. ISBN: 9781978711976.

Reviewed by Peter Stevenson

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The unlikely pairing of lepers alongside older people in the subtitle could deter some from exploring this thought-provoking study. However, this exploration of the concept of kinship deserves attention, because it raises important questions about the ways in which society regards and treats older people. It could help to stimulate discussion about the church's ministry within the context of our ageing European populations.

Arguing that Western society is 'creating an environment that is increasingly hostile to older persons', Carlo Calleja seeks to retrieve the practice of kinship that he believes has 'been lost through the cracks of contemporary society' (pp. xxiv–xxv).

Chapter 2 explores the particular 'loss of kinship with older people', offering a disturbing picture of the social, economic, and political factors which help to marginalise older people. In societies where 'the young adult male is the norm' (p. 30), older persons, with their complex health needs, can be viewed as a burden on society. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's ideas about the *homo sacer,* Calleja fears that society often regards the lives of older persons as being of little value. This leads to the chilling claim that by 'masking the aging process and relegating them to nursing homes' older persons 'are virtually eliminated through isolation and long-term institutionalization. In states where physician-assisted suicide […] is legal, elimination is actual and overt' (p. 27). While such stark statements can be challenged, this chapter paints a haunting picture of factors contributing to the marginalisation and exclusion of many older people.

Calleja responds by arguing for a commitment to a 'solidaristic kinship' which can help rebuild connections with marginalised groups such as older people. Such solidarity goes beyond 'biological kinship' based on genetics or 'spiritual kinship' based on membership of a religious group. Within 'solidaristic kinship' the element which both parties have in common is 'affliction'. The relationship with older persons must be characterised not by paternalistic benevolence, but by a 'vulnerability' which is willing to share in the suffering of the other. A commitment to the regular practice of such 'incarnational solidarity' (pp. 57–58) generates virtues which shape Christian character.

Calleja refers to ways in which the church developed practices expressing solidarity with lepers. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, urged believers into 'showing sympathy and brotherhood' to people suffering with leprosy, because the victim of disease was one's 'kinsman and fellow-servant' (pp. 117–118). More recently the L'Arche and Sant' Egidio communities are living examples of practising incarnational solidarity with marginalised people. Recognising that there is no magical

formula for putting such theory into practice, Calleja urges the church to find practical ways of expressing solidarity with older people and others on the margins.

The author makes clear that practising solidaristic kinship with others is more than just an enriching experience for individual believers. For when the church develops practices of incarnational solidarity with people on the margins, it is reaffirming their value and offering an alternative vision to society.

As one older reader, this scholarly work leaves me with some serious questions to ponder.

Teun van der Leer, *Looking in the Other Direction: The Story of the Believers Church Conferences.* Amsterdam Series in Baptist and Mennonite Theologies (Pickwick Publications, 2023), 528 pages. ISBN: 9781666766790.

Reviewed by Ksenija Magda

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In this massive work, Teun van der Leer does not merely shift furniture on the proverbial 'upper floor' of the church (of which Christ is the foundational first floor). He reconstructs half of that floor by targeting baptism. Applying what has emerged as a theology of believers' churches (BC) from the nineteen BC conferences between 1967 and 2017, he has attempted the impossible: to argue that BC – traditionally labelled as 'sects' – have developed 'a style of conversation' (if not a theology) for the stuffy ecumenical encounters, although by sheer definition BC are 'principally diverse, distinctive, and provisional', focused on the now, and avoiding if possible any 'one perpetual voice' (p. 438).

In the seven chapters of Part I, Van der Leer examines the content of BC conferences through his fourfold lens (faith, community, hermeneutics, and mission) to identify theological trends around these items in the papers and to detect possible new themes. In the remaining

two chapters, which form Part II, he constructs parameters for an ecumenical conversation on baptism. His conclusion: a 'kenotic' attitude is needed (and is already developing). If believers accept infant baptism and confirmation as their completed Christian initiation, BC should not 'trouble' them with 're-baptism' (p. 463). This is already an existing ecumenical practice in most BC, as they accept other Christians as brothers and sisters. For churches baptising infants, a 'kenotic' attitude may mean to accept graciously that some of their members may be led by the Spirit to believer's baptism.

Presenting the 50 years' worth of BC conference material is in itself a contribution to knowledge. But Van der Leer's book is hugely valuable beyond this immediate agenda and he cautiously points to some of those issues. I, for one, was stunned by the inclusion of women as speakers in the early BC conferences which listed even the Christian Catholic feminist pioneer, Rosemary Redford Ruether. Researching when and why women appear and disappear from the programme of BC conferences may be illuminating.

The book could have introduced technical terms and especially relationships among the BC more clearly. The definition of the relationship between BC and evangelicalism should not have waited until chapter 3. 'National church' and BC are discussed against the US background near the end, but questions about European evangelicals, and the German 'Evangelisch/Evangelikal' distinction are only marginal. As in a mystery novel, things are eventually (partially) resolved in the realisation that such conclusions can be drawn only after conference contents have been scrutinised. Surprising opportunities for conclusions become evident. For me, the nature of Southern Baptist 'take-over' is clearly revealed not as a minor deflection from BC on random issues, but as a major manipulative shift away from BC to an institution utilising state power to protect one's own (faith?) political privilege (pp. 321–322). I am certain that by reading this book, you will find your own "Aha" moments in unexpected places.

J. August Higgins, *The Crisis of Conversion: Reimagining Religious Experience for a Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality*. Amsterdam Series in Baptist and Mennonite Theologies (Pickwick Publications, 2024), 163 pages. ISBN: 9798385204618.

Reviewed by Toivo Pilli

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J. August Higgins's book *The Crisis of Conversion* is the second volume in the Amsterdam Series in Baptist and Mennonite Theologies. The Series is a platform for scholars to publish monographs and collections of articles on topics such as Baptist and Mennonite history, systematic theology, ethics, and biblical hermeneutics. The present volume fits very well into this framework as it explores one of the central issues in evangelical theology: conversion. The author argues that focus on conversion should be seen in relation to a wider shift of experience moving into the centre of Christian spirituality, historically during times of great revivals, with continuous influence in evangelical traditions.

The reader needs to start with an awareness of a crisis within North American evangelical life around the issue of religious experience. The author helpfully describes the roots of the problem; for example, the role of Jonathan Edwards's teaching of the experience of conversion, or 'gracious affections', and the 'internal vital principle' of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. All this reorientated the conversion event towards the individual's experience of God, a clear shift from the earlier Puritan model. Ralph Waldo Emerson added an aspect of aesthetic subjectivity to the picture; though, as the author emphasises, his idealistic 'self-reliant individualism' was limited and could not 'properly address even the most morally egregious evil of his day, slavery' (p. 124).

Higgins also brings into the discussion the American Pragmatist philosophical tradition, represented in the volume by William James and Josiah Royce. They focused more on 'reflective depths of sustained systematic inquiry', using methods of logic, psychology, and semiotics. In brief: one problem with religious experience is how personal

experienced beliefs can be translated into lived-out reality and influence wider society, including larger religious traditions. And what is the normative dimension of experience? These, and other, critical questions have only become sharper with the emergence of postmodern worldviews.

Seeking for a constructive way forward, the volume develops an academic conversation between Sandra Schneiders's methodological approach and Amos Yong's pneumatological theology, offering possibilities to alleviate tension between the individual and the community, individual experience, and biblical interpretation in Christian spirituality. Higgins does not put aside or diminish the role of experience, as Enlightenment Rationalism or evangelical foundationalism tended to do. Instead, he has made a plausible attempt to 'recover a more vibrant notion of religious experience', especially using Amos Yong's concept of 'pneumatological imagination'. The argument in the book provides a pathway forward for 'the recovery of solid epistemological method that retains both the centrality of religious experience for evangelical spirituality, and the centrality of the Bible for evangelical theology' (p. 147). This volume by Higgins demonstrates that evangelical convictions can find fresh interpretations and dynamic transformation in conversation with other traditions, such as Roman Catholic and pentecostal-charismatic.

Klaus Koschorke, *A Short History of Christianity Beyond the West: Asia, Africa, and Latin America 1450–2000* (Brill, 2025), 374 pages. ISBN: 9789004699823.

Reviewed by Tommaso Manzon

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Klaus Koschorke is Professor Emeritus at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in Early and Global History of Christianity, as well as the recipient of several guest professorships in multiple global universities. His area of expertise is the history of Christianity in the Global South. In terms of his conceptual contributions, he is best

remembered for developing the concept of polycentricity in reference to the history of World Christianity.

Koschorke's latest output, here reviewed, bears the title *A Short History of Christianity Beyond the West* and presents itself as an introductory-level textbook, seeking to offer a 'compact and vivid overview of the history of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America since 1450, focussing on diversity and interdependence, local actors and global effects' (from the back cover). By doing so, the author aims to present a panorama of the development of non-Western (mostly Protestant and Roman Catholic) Christianities and to 'contribute to a more integrated view of the history of Christianity in the non-Western world' (p. xxiv).

If these are the author's stated goals, we can safely say that he manages to reach them. Within the space of a mid-sized book (that is, by textbook standards), the author succeeds in making the reader aware of the fundamental contours of an often-neglected segment of the history of World Christianity. The structure of Christianity as a global and polycentric movement is well presented with reference to different areas and stages of history. The work is divided into five chronological cesurae, each discussed with reference to Latin America, Africa, and Asia, maintaining throughout an accessible, tied, at times gripping narrative. As a plus, both the volume as a whole and each individual chapter comes attached with an abundant bibliography as well as illustrations and maps.

In terms of the book's limitations, one could point out the almost total exclusion of any discussion of Eastern Orthodoxy. Of course, this is an understandable choice in order not to inflate the book's volume. Nonetheless, at times, the feeling is that of an incomplete picture. Moreover, there are some repetitions and editing omissions, especially in the central portions of the text.

To sum it up, *A Short History of Christianity Beyond the West* is a totally recommended reading for those who are seeking an accessible introduction to the subject of World Christianity. It is also valuable as a dependable reference book, as well as a source of direction in terms of further readings, given its solid bibliographical apparatus.

Pontien Ndagijimana Batibuka*, Baptism as an Event of Taking Responsibility* (Langham Academic, 2022), 272 pages. ISBN: 9781839732348.

Reviewed by Linda Margaret Aadne

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Pontien Ndagijimana Batibuka's book, with its full title: *Baptism as an Event of Taking Responsibility: A New Reading of Romans 5:12–6:23*, offers a strikingly original interpretation of baptism by situating it within the broader framework of ancient initiation practices. Rather than treating baptism solely as a theological symbol or sacramental rite, Batibuka approaches it as a transformative event that shares structural similarities with socio-religious initiation rituals found across cultures. This comparative lens allows him to highlight baptism as a decisive moment of transition, one that marks both divine encounter and human responsibility.

Central to Batibuka's argument is his fourfold model of baptism. He describes baptism as: (1) a divine encounter in which God acts to claim and consecrate the believer; (2) a break with the old life, symbolising the renunciation of sin and former allegiances; (3) a public transfer of loyalty, where the baptised individual openly declares allegiance to Christ; and (4) a commitment to a new way of living, expressed through ethical responsibility and communal participation. This framework resonates deeply within African contexts, where communal rites of passage are integral to identity formation. In such settings, baptism is not merely a private spiritual act but a radical, public consecration to Christ that redefines one's place within the community of faith.

In this work the author also engages the long-standing theological debate concerning divine and human agency in baptism. He resists the polarisation that has often divided interpreters: on one side, sacramental readings that emphasise divine action to the point of minimising human response; on the other, symbolic readings that

reduce baptism to a mere human testimony of faith. Batibuka insists that baptism must be understood as both God's intervention and the believer's pledge of responsibility. This dual emphasis, he argues, recovers baptism's ethical and communal dimensions, reminding the church that baptism is not only about grace received but also about responsibility assumed.

Although Batibuka does not explicitly reference them, his work reawakens mid-twentieth-century discussions on baptism associated with Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. Brunner challenged the traditional objective-subjective antithesis dividing views on baptism. He emphasised the relational character of baptism, highlighting the interplay between divine agency and human response in faith. Barth, particularly in his later writings, distinguished between Spirit baptism, which he believed occurred at conversion, and water baptism, which he regarded as a purely human act of ethical commitment to the cause of Christ. Batibuka's emphasis on responsibility echoes these earlier debates, situating his work within a broader theological trajectory.

Nevertheless, Batibuka's reliance on initiation categories raises methodological concerns. While his comparative approach is innovative, importing external socio-religious frameworks into Romans risks distorting Paul's Christological and pneumatological focus. A more comprehensive and biblically grounded interpretation might have emerged through engagement with a wider range of Pauline texts. Furthermore, Batibuka's strong emphasis on responsibility occasionally overshadows Paul's message of grace. The mystical dimension of baptism as union with Christ so central to Romans 6–8 is somewhat diminished in favour of ethical responsibility.

In conclusion, this book is a creative contribution to baptismal theology. It reframes baptism as a decisive act of responsibility and communal ethics, offering fresh insights particularly relevant in African contexts. While its methodological and theological limitations mean it should be supplemented by broader Pauline scholarship, the work succeeds in stimulating renewed reflection on the meaning and significance of baptism for the contemporary church.

Mark Valeri, *The Opening of the Protestant Mind: How Anglo-American Protestants Embraced Religious Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 308 pages. ISBN: 978-0197663677.

Reviewed by Drew Patton

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The Opening of the Protestant Mind has as its aim a very specific yet monumental task of redefining the way conversion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is understood. Mark Valeri states that one of the major aims of the book is to discuss the changing perceptions of the understanding of other religions, including the importance of moral liberty in that comprehension. This aim is significant, in that it shows that Valeri's book is not making a specific argument per se. Rather, he sets out to make a more general presentation that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American Protestant thinking regarding conversion was much more varied and less concrete than is often thought. The sources for Valeri's work are travel narratives, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and popular books of the time. Valeri points out that the travel narratives themselves were the sources of much of what was believed about people throughout the world, and that the demonisation of those peoples and their religions was categorically bolstered by certain popular narratives. However, after the interregnum and especially after the English Civil War these narratives became less hostile and more curious.

The rest of Valeri's book shows the increasing curiosity of the British and Anglo-American perspective on various religions, both in their immediate experiences (as with the Indigenous Americans) and with people they rarely came across, such as peoples from Asia. Valeri points out rather intently that the political climate for Anglos and Anglo-Americans was of utmost importance and a chief influence on the mindset of Protestants in the British Kingdom. When the political climate was in turmoil, such as during the Civil War and Interregnum period, those writing about religious expressions outside of the majority Protestant mindset were viewed with scepticism and disdain; however, when the politics of the country were more firmly planted, the majority

of Protestants were much more open to religious differences and different religions. At the same time, Valeri makes clear that many Protestants did not have a problem holding what he calls contradictory points of view, especially concerning political and social freedom for Africans and Indigenous Americans.

Valeri's argument in *The Opening of the Protestant Mind* is well supported and is much more reasonable than the black and white perspective of modernist historians. Valeri makes his point with solid sourcing and great nuance, showing that attempts to coalesce opinions into one unified understanding are not only impractical but also belie the facts these sources reveal. Valeri's sources themselves have limits, specifically the lack of self-awareness of colonial efforts by missionaries and others who sought to evangelise the heathen while broadening the empire's reach. Furthermore, Valeri's emphasis on sources that lacked self-awareness could be seen as limiting the objective understanding necessary for making the claims from primary sources that Valeri tends to make. Ultimately, Valeri's book *The Opening of the Protestant Mind* is a fresh look at a specific time period and the way in which people in that time frame changed and challenged perspectives on others.