

Spirituality as discipleship: the Anabaptist Heritage

Introduction

On being presented with the theme of Baptist spirituality one might wonder at the conjunction of the two words, 'Baptist' and 'spirituality'. Although it is hoped that this might change, Baptist spirituality is not an expression that trips off the tongue so easily as, say, 'Ignatian spirituality', or 'Celtic spirituality' or even 'Pentecostal spirituality'. We would do ourselves a great injustice however if we thereby thought that Baptists are not spiritually minded people. Like the man who was surprised to discover that all his life he had been speaking prose, Baptists have their own forms of spirituality or piety even if they are not in the habit of taking them out and dusting them from time to time for their own satisfaction. The fact is that there is a forgetfulness about most Baptists, in the United Kingdom at least, which I personally find endearing rather than worrying: a desire not to overstate the Baptist half of the expression 'Baptist Christian', and so not to identify too readily a specifically Baptist spirituality.

Contributing spiritualities

At the same time, we should recognise that in the interwoven complexities of Christian movements Baptists are conscious of their solidarity with broader movements and traditions formative of Baptist spirituality. Their way of giving attention to Christ is adjacent to a number of others. The theme 'under the rule of Christ' which under-girds these essays, points us for instance in the direction of the Reformed tradition for which an ordered life, individual and communal, under the rule of Christ mediated through the Word of God by the Spirit of God has been an abiding concern. The bulk of English Baptists emerged for sure out of the wider Reformed tradition associated with Calvin and Geneva, whilst incorporating the more radically reformed ideas of believers baptism, congregational government and religious liberty into their pool of convictions. Even the emergence of both Particular and General Baptist groupings needs to be seen, along with the Arminian and Calvinist debates about predestination and the extent of the atonement, as a disagreement *within* the broader Reformed tradition, rather than *between* the Reformed and a rival position, as is often suggested by popular usage. Baptist spirituality needs to be aware therefore of its roots in Reformed spirituality.

Then, more immediately recognisably, there is evangelical spirituality.¹ Baptists are evangelicals. Their spirituality contains the twin foci of devotion to scripture as a life-giving authority and personal conversion linked in their case to freely-chosen baptism. They are committed to personal witness and evangelism. They can trace roots both in Puritanism and Pietism, the precursors of modern-day evangelicalism. All the indications are that Baptist churches participate in and

¹ James M. Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality: From the Wesleys to John Stott* (London: SPCK, 1991)

contribute to pan-evangelical enterprises on a large scale and large numbers of British Baptists would likely identify themselves as evangelicals before they did so as Baptists. This accounts for the easy flow of membership transfers between Baptist churches and other self-consciously evangelical congregations. Baptist spirituality overlaps with evangelical spirituality and perhaps should be considered a particular and distinctive instance of it. Characteristic evangelical concerns for the practice of the spiritual life, supremely the desire to spend time in Bible reading and personal prayer, have been staple aspects of the life of dedicated Baptists, as much as other evangelicals.

But here we come to my own particular area in this project as a whole: Anabaptist spirituality. This too is a resource on which we may draw for understanding the forms of piety we have espoused and for shaping our spiritual practices for the future. I have long been drawn to Anabaptism. In so far as there has been a renaissance of Anabaptist studies in this country over the last 30 years I can claim to have had a small part in it.² This began for me as an aspect of another abiding concern, which has been the renewal of the congregation as the primary form of Christian existence. The Anabaptist movements captured my imagination as examples of free congregations gathered under the rule of Christ and pursuing the life of wholehearted discipleship. Over the years, Anabaptist studies, despite the fact that one would be hard put to find a university department that could supervise a thesis in the subject, have undergone a modest revolution in this country consequent upon a previous such renaissance within the Mennonite communities of North America. It is impossible not to mention at this point the names of Alan and Ellie Kreider whose patient, saintly and scholarly advocacy and embodiment of contemporary Anabaptist convictions have left a permanent mark on British Christianity, and not only on Baptists.³ Indeed, so complete has been the retrieval of Anabaptist awareness in some circles that the present danger lies not in the neglect of this part of our heritage but in its overstatement. Celtic Christianity and Anabaptism now risk being thought of as the only 'politically correct' Christian movements in the history of the church. The slightly cynical judgement that Celtic Christianity is a construct manufactured somewhere in the South East of England might be applied *mutatis mutandis* to Anabaptism. American Mennonites passed through a stage of reading their own history which, whatever the undoubted scholarship behind it, also bore traces of high denominational ideology. This was especially manifest in the preference for seeing the so-called 'evangelical Anabaptists' originating in Zürich as the 'Anabaptists proper' quite distinct from the violent 'maccabean Anabaptists' of Münster and other places from whom Mennonites wished to distance themselves. It is true that all historical readings are to some degree ideological, but it is not impossible to pass beyond them to a more chastened

² See J. F. V. Nicholson, *Our Heritage: The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire 1647-1987* (Leeds: Yorkshire Baptist Association and Lancashire and Cheshire Baptist Association, 1987), p. 150.

³ Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray, eds., *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000).

and nuanced appreciation of past movements which values them while not overstating their actual achievements. Anabaptism, with all the necessary qualifications, might still figure for us as a source of inspiration and renewal.

It is not my desire to re-enter the debate about the origins of English Baptists and their relationship to continental Anabaptism. Suffice it at this point to re-state the judgement that the Baptists find their primary point of origin in English Puritan Separatism.⁴ However, as I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere, Baptist theology can be understood to stand part way between the Reformed and the Anabaptist.⁵ Baptists represent a modified form of Reformed theology in that those elements of Calvinist teaching to do with baptism, church government and state are revised in the direction of believers baptism, congregational government and separation of church and state. These are all movements in a direction upon which Anabaptist ideas may well have had some influence. On the other hand, unlike dominant surviving forms of Anabaptism, Baptists did not reject service as magistrates and were not and have not generally been pacifists, a fact more than amply revealed in the English Civil Wars which followed on closely from the appearance of the English Baptists and in which they played a significant part. However whatever the clear blue water between them, Baptists and Anabaptists manifestly belong to the same family and it is possible to claim Anabaptism as part of our heritage with a high degree of conviction. Anabaptist spirituality can therefore coherently shape and influence our own as part of what we have been given historically.

In the course of my own studies I have been persuaded that theologically I am more of a Baptist than an Anabaptist or a Mennonite, especially when it comes to participation in the social order. However when I reflect about what has drawn me to Anabaptism I can identify certain strengths which resonate for me as a Baptist and which exert a magnetic pull on the ways in which I wish to do theology and, indeed, pursue discipleship. This personal agenda will shape this presentation and since neither spirituality nor theology can be pursued without a distinct element of personal pilgrimage I regard this as fully appropriate. Here I shall concern myself with the centrality of Christ, the primacy of the congregation and the theme of *Nachfolge Christi*, or following after Christ, as a motif for discipleship.

The centrality of Christ

The first and foremost of these concerns focuses upon Christ as the centre of our theological thinking, our biblical interpretation and our Christian devotion. If the

⁴ Kenneth R. Manley covers the ground effectively in 'Origins of the Baptists: The Case for Development from Puritanism-Separatism' in William H. Brackney, ed., *Faith, Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990* (Birmingham, AL: Samford University Press, 1990), pp. 56-69.

⁵ Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), pp. 42-44.

orthodox Christian claim about the person and work of Christ is true, namely that Christ is the very incarnation of the pre-existent Word of God who was with God in the beginning and is God, then this seems to me absolutely required. Christ is the one in whom God defines God's own self in space and time. 'We have seen his glory as the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth'.⁶ The implications of this are, of course, massive, leading to a redefinition of what we mean in the light of Christ by the word *God*, of what God is like and of how methodologically we construct our theology and read our Bibles: we take Christ as the interpretative centre of the unfolding scriptural testimony. Christ is the 'narrow christocentric defile' (to quote Keith Clements expounding Dietrich Bonhoeffer)⁷ through which all our theology must pass in order for us to think Christianly about God or indeed about anything. When it comes to reading the Bible, we read it under the rule of Christ.

Now of course, this is an affirmation which can be misapplied in so far and in as much as the Christ through whom we interpret scripture becomes a Christ of our own construction and imagination. So we play this imagined 'Christ' off against parts of the Bible that we do not like and whose authority we wish to evade by reference to one who is not the incarnation of God but of the ideals and preferences that are currently acceptable and appealing to us. This is a genuine danger as has been abundantly demonstrated by critical scholarship and we acknowledge it. The only Christ to whom we properly have access is the one to whom scripture bears witness. We may construct neither an 'historical' Jesus who is behind and other than the biblical testimony nor an idealised Jesus who is the standard-bearer of whatever causes are currently fashionable. But reading the biblical testimony faithfully leads us to conclude that the trajectory of revelation emerging from the scriptures reaches its zenith and is at its clearest in the 'sun of righteousness' which rises with 'healing in its wings'.⁸ All scripture is to be interpreted therefore in the light of the light which shines brightest and every attempt to relegate Christ to some secondary role *subordinate* to scripture rather than *supreme* within scripture needs to be resisted.

It does seem to me that in this apparently subtle distinction there are enormous implications and potential divergences. Indeed, which way we turn at this junction determines what form of evangelicalism we end up with. Karl Barth was entirely right to challenge and modify Reformed theology at this point. It is possible to be biblical without being Christian. The Christian faith represents a development within Judaism which embraced the revelation of God contained in the Hebrew scriptures while radically modifying it in the light of a Messiah who suffered and died and rose again for our salvation. The primary form of the Word of God, according to Barth, is the incarnate Word to which the secondary form of the Word, scripture, bears witness. In this construct we read the scriptures not for

⁶ John 1:14 (NRSV margin)

⁷ Keith W. Clements, *A Patriotism for Today: Love of Country in Dialogue with the Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1984 and 1986), p. 57.

⁸ Malachi 4: 2.

themselves but for their testimony to the Word which is their centre. Contrast this with that understanding of the authority of scripture which sees all parts of scripture as possessing equal authority. The argument asserts that Christ validated the Hebrew scriptures by accepting them as the authority by which he lived, and further validated the Greek scriptures by telling his apostles that the Spirit would lead them into all truth, so each part of scripture is to be received with the same reverence. Christ therefore becomes one extended instance within a series of instances of revelation all of which possess equal authority. On this basis theology and preaching can be taken in hand in some of its aspects without significant reference to Christ, and often is. Granted that texts do need to be interpreted in their own terms, in the wider task of theology and preaching it is only as their content is brought into relationship with Christ that they become Christian.

To take one example, what the Bible teaches about predestination can be gathered from a series of texts without substantial reference to Christ himself. Christ then becomes part of a predestinarian scheme which claims to be grounded in the Word of God but is in fact under-informed by Christ himself. In an alternative, Barthian understanding, nothing can be understood about God except it be first of all informed by that of God which is made known in the primary form of the Word. When this is done, I would suggest, understandings about an eternal decree made before the foundation of the world to consign a proportion of humankind to eternal damnation become unsustainable, however neatly logical they can be made to seem. As Barth argued, what is first of all revealed in Christ is that God is for us.⁹

To take a second example, the doctrine of God is routinely pursued in the textbooks by first constructing a definition of God in which God is portrayed as infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. Christ is then to be accounted for within the terms of a God we have already defined apart from him; and the primary datum about God, which is that God is both Triune and free, is left as a conundrum to be accounted for. By contrast if we begin with the God who is to be encountered in and through the one who is the Word of God in the belief that here God is to be defined, we begin not with a series of abstractions but with a living experience of God's being with us, and so with the question, 'who must this God be who can meet us in human form, sharing our life and embracing our death for our own salvation and that of the world?'

When we speak of being under the rule of Christ, we must first mean by this the rule of Christ *within the scriptures and their interpretation*, not the rule of the

⁹ In relation to his theological predecessors P. K. Jewett comments, 'The nature of their mistake, [Barth] believed, was that they divorced God from Jesus Christ – that is to say, when they thought of God's election, they thought abstractly of the eternal decree of the hidden God rather than concretely of the gracious purpose of God revealed in Jesus Christ. As a result, they missed the decisive insight into the heart of the matter, which has to do with the question of the object of predestination.' *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids and Exeter: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1985), p. 19.

scriptures over Christ. We should be grateful in this that the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle, followed by a number of other unions, declare the basis of our Union to include the belief that 'our God 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'. The phrasing is both significant and salutary, safeguarding both the centrality of the incarnate (and now ascended) Word as our supreme authority and also the irreplaceable role of the scriptures in bearing decisive witness to that revelation. This surely has significance in describing Baptist spirituality as both radically Christ-centred and radically biblically-orientated but with Christ as the Lord of scripture and the Lord within scripture.

In this section then, I have applied the term 'under the rule of Christ', first of all to the scriptures as a way of approaching their interpretation and application. I contend that this was a significant contribution of the Anabaptist way¹⁰ and that it resonates with the theological revolution in the Reformed tradition that we associate with Karl Barth. In some approaches to the Anglican liturgy, the reading of the Gospel is treated differently from other Bible readings. The Gospels are carried into the midst of the congregation. The people stand and turn towards the reader while the Gospel is being read as a sign that they are giving particular attention to these parts of the biblical text. Perhaps in our ostensibly non-liturgical tradition there is something we might learn from this.

The primacy of the congregation

A second feature that attracted me to Anabaptism was its concern for the congregation of committed and faithful disciples and to a communal existence within a rule and order of life expressed through those congregations. The rejection of priestly hierarchy did not denote for them a desire to live anarchically but within communities in which power was commonly owned and order was primarily understood as devotion to a godly and holy life within a supportive discipline. As a minister, realising the potential of the congregation has, of course, always been a motivating factor. The possibility that a group of people might exist within the wider community as a spiritually vibrant, mutually supportive, theologically instructed and ethically distinctive presence, now gathered for worship, now scattered in service and witness, has always had immense appeal. If Luke in Acts 2: 41-47 intended to set before us an ideal of congregational life then he certainly succeeded:

So those who welcomed (Peter's) message were baptized and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had

¹⁰ See further on this Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), pp. 70-96.

all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

In his excellent description of Anabaptist spirituality, Arnold Snyder develops the idea that Anabaptism grew in part out of the monastic concern to live the holy life within community, only in the Anabaptist experiment the communities were to be set within the context of daily life and work, of family and community. This is a form of laicised monasticism. Baptism for the Anabaptist was equivalent to the monastic vow giving entry as it did to a professed community under the discipline of the observed life.¹¹ Within such communities the primary preoccupation was the imitation of Christ, as it had been in late medieval monasticism. It provided a significant spiritual impulse for the Anabaptists, many of them formerly members of religious orders. Living, therefore, under the rule of Christ within specific and identifiable communities was a crucial aspect of being in Christ's way of discipleship. The theme 'under the rule of Christ' carries echoes of the monastic tradition which shared the Anabaptist concern for intense closeness to Jesus. Piety was not to be pursued or expressed in individualism or isolation but communally, so that communion, foot-washing, singing and corporate prayer should be seen as indispensable aspects of Anabaptist spirituality. (It is to be noted that in the use of hymns and songs, Anabaptists were well ahead of their Baptist cousins being, from the beginning, a song-writing and hymn-singing community)

Shedding ourselves of romantic notions, we know from history that the community life of Anabaptists was sometimes the occasion for what we would regard as abusive practice. We may have no desire to go where some of them went in the practice of the 'ban', or 'shunning' or in engendering legalistic social conformity, or even in the common ownership of goods characteristic of the Hutterites. At the same time, there are immense challenges here in framing a Baptist spirituality. If we are to acknowledge the rule of Christ as revealed in the scriptures, we also acknowledge him as his presence is experienced and discerned in the congregations which gather around him and the Word which bears testimony to him. It is no accident that the Declaration of Principle, already quoted in part, goes on to say that 'each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret and administer His Laws.' Here we are surely to understand the 'laws' of Christ to mean not simply or only the teaching of Jesus as given in the NT but the laws, or guidance, he continues to give through the Holy Spirit to the congregations which submit to his rule. Within a Baptist spirituality, living as 'acoustic' communities which exist by hearing the Word of

¹¹ Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2004), p. 82.

God and also being 'hermeneutical communities'¹² which bear the responsibility of interpreting and administering that Word, count as primary ways in which we attend to the presence and work of Christ in the world.

The Christian life is surely then to be understood as congregational life, as consisting in membership of a living community which gathers under the rule of Christ to worship him and to seek his will. In such congregations Christ continues to be particularly present in the world he has redeemed. Congregations are to be understood as far more than convenience stores into which we may drop for necessary supplies while our lives are focussed elsewhere. There is an element of mutual indwelling, of finding ourselves by participation in churches which gather with the promise that Christ is particularly *there*, in the midst of them. The word 'spirituality' can often connote for us something that we do with our solitariness, an individualistic seeking after God perhaps on retreat or in a quiet place, and no-one can deny the place that such spiritual exercises have in our lives. But in a congregationalist tradition it must also embrace the notion of membership, of participating in the body and of being joined by the Spirit in the bond of peace to a company in which there is an expression of divine *order*.

Following after Christ

A third dimension of Anabaptism which attracted me was its stress on discipleship as *Nachfolge Christi*, following after Christ, a phrase which picks up the invitation of the Lord himself.¹³ It has often been observed that evangelicalism has had a preference in reading the scriptures for the epistles, especially the writings of Paul. This was where *doctrine*, the real meat of the Word was to be found. By contrast the Gospels were *stories*, and so manifestly inferior. Such literary prejudice has been accompanied by a theological prejudice which has understood Christ through his death and resurrection as the ground of our justification and salvation while neglecting the call to imitate his life and to follow his manner and pattern of sacrificial self-giving. It is sometimes pointed out that in the Apostles' Creed the whole life of Jesus is contracted to a comma between 'born of the Virgin Mary' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. Without neglecting the dimensions of Christ's death which mark it as an atoning sacrifice, the Anabaptists understood the cross of Christ also to be a pattern of the whole shape of Jesus' redemptive life, and therefore of the life of the believers who earnestly follow him. This is a life of self-giving and self-denial, of returning good in place of evil, of absorbing and enduring hostility rather than returning it.

Arnold Snyder points out how in the late medieval period there was a large emphasis on the humanity and suffering of Christ of which Thomas à Kempis' work *Of the Imitation of Christ* was simply the best known example. He finds the parallels with this emphasis in Anabaptism striking.¹⁴ The Anabaptists coined the

¹² Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 222-223.

¹³ Matthew 16: 24-28.

¹⁴ *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, p. 44.

term *Gelassenheit*, or 'yielded abandonment' to express the appropriate relationship of the believer to Christ. At the heart of Anabaptism is a process of 'learning to will what God wills', which is similar to the emphasis of the monastic tradition.¹⁵ In this sense it has been claimed by Walter Klaassen that Anabaptism is 'neither Catholic nor Protestant' in that it neither imagines that justification is the end product of a process of sanctification nor that faith alone without inner transformation is an adequate understanding of the divine remedy for sin.¹⁶ Snyder points out that this could equally be understood as 'both Catholic and Protestant' in the Anabaptist intention deliberately to combine ascetic Catholic piety with reforming Protestant ideas.¹⁷ We can, I think, closely identify the idea of living under the rule of Christ with that of *Gelassenheit* and identify this as the posture which believers may assume in their participation both in the life of the Living God and in the community which finds its centre and soul in God's being.

Formative values and convictions

Having identified the centrality of Christ, the primacy of the congregation and the motif of following after Christ, and related these to the theme of the rule of Christ, an appropriate summary of these and other elements can be found in the Anabaptist Network's statement of values and convictions. These deserve to be well known and appreciated in Baptist congregations.

- Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, for our understanding of church and our engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.
- Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.
- Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalized Jesus, and has left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture. As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

¹⁵ *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001)

¹⁷ *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, pp. 27-28.

- The frequent association of the church with status, wealth and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted, aware that such discipleship may attract opposition, resulting in suffering and sometimes ultimately martyrdom.
- Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship. As we eat together, sharing bread and wine, we sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender and baptism is for believers.
- Spirituality and economics are inter-connected. In an individualist and consumerist culture and in a world where economic injustice is rife, we are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation, and working for justice.
- Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to finding non-violent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society, and between nations, and with the natural world.¹⁸

Challenges for a Baptist spirituality

Having outlined these themes let me now draw out, perhaps more provocatively and more programmatically than in what has preceded, some areas which might challenge us as we re-imagine some of their implications for understanding and shaping Baptist spirituality.

Firstly, there are words here with which we do not sit as easily as previous generations have done. In this language and in the Reformed, evangelical and Anabaptist spiritualities to which I have referred, we find quite crucially the recognition of *authority*. We are 'under' the 'rule' of Christ. In an age which values perhaps more than anything else both personal autonomy and self-actualisation, and which reads the language of lordship as domination and oppression, the concept of heteronomy, that I am called to find myself through submission to the rule of another, is both alien and offensive. Similarly *Gelassenheit*, yieldedness, and the notion of an obedient following of another is construed by many as a diminishing of self-worth and dignity.

Now there are two ways in which we might sympathise with this modern instinct. It is clear to us that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to a willing submission, an act of freedom in which we choose to acknowledge the authority

¹⁸ The Anabaptist Network publicity leaflet and www.anabaptistnetwork.com

of the one whom we call Lord. Within the historical experience of Baptists there has been a struggle in society between one principle which argues, 'faith is so important that all must share the same one' and that which argues, 'faith is so important that all must be free to embrace that which seems most persuasive to them'. Baptists set their faces against any notion of compulsory religion in the belief that only that which is freely given is spiritually valuable. In similar vein, while consistently respectful towards the authorities, Baptists have firmly espoused the doctrine of 'the crown rights of the Redeemer' causing them to be jealous of Christ's claim to their ultimate loyalty and affection. Neither in matters spiritual nor temporal have they wished to acknowledge the lordship of any other than Christ, who alone is worthy and to whom alone such devotion is properly given. In this sense Baptist acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ follows a 'disjunctive' rather than a 'conjunctive' logic, that is to say rather than validating the claims of powerful earthly rulers it subverts and relativizes them.¹⁹ These qualifications aside, there is a demand which God-in-Christ makes upon us which can only be expressed by use of the language of authority, obedience, submission and duty. Any spirituality which does not contain these elements is deceiving itself, since we all acknowledge something which is ultimate even if it is ourselves. Learning to live under authority, the authority of Christ over individuals and congregations mediated by the Spirit through the scriptures is a fundamental configuring of any form of Christian, let alone Baptist, spirituality. Furthermore, since it is in scripture that we find the normative witness to the Lord whose authority we gladly embrace, any Baptist spirituality is bound to be deeply scriptural. There is no Christ other than he to whom the scriptures point. Despite the difficulties within it with which we wrestle, the biblical text is a place of sacramental encounter as we find the Lord speaking to us from within it.

Secondly, the primacy of the congregation and its indispensable role in any form of Baptist spirituality leads us to think carefully about the life of our churches. The plain fact is that few congregations are able to bear the weight that our theology places upon them. The levels of spiritual passion, biblical and theological literacy, ethical discernment and formation in the Christ-like virtues are, in many of our congregations, much lower than our theology suggests they ought to be. Neither does it particularly help congregations to have expectations which are beyond the capacity of erring, sinning humans to deliver. The corrosive acids at work undermining congregational life are considerable. Some of these derive from the external effects of contemporary culture upon congregational life;²⁰ others are corrosive from within as congregations lose confidence or exist for themselves rather than dynamically under the rule of Christ. Indeed, a current threat to the churches exists in the tendency towards a post-congregationalism which has given up on the congregational experiment, at least in its inherited form, precisely because the sluggish realities of church life prove at worst a hindrance

¹⁹ Matthew 23: 8-10.

²⁰ Haddon Willmer, 'The Collapse of Congregations', *Arvil*, Volume 18 Number 4 (2001), pp. 249-260.

to spiritual growth and at best a boring irrelevance.²¹ In a time when the rhetoric of what we should be doing often surrounds church-planting on the one hand and emerging church thinking on the other (both of which remain congregational in orientation), the fact remains that the majority of our churches consists of established congregations which stand in need of renewal in all manner of ways, theological, spiritual, organisational and ethical. Enabling such congregational renewal is a massive challenge for ministers and one which is currently under-addressed in Baptist circles. Unless we can achieve spiritual communities which are well-ordered and attractive embodiments of Christian devotion and mission there is little else we can achieve. Yet there is much to suggest that the congregation, with all its possibilities, distinctives and durability, has a great deal still to offer, whatever the corrosive forces ranged against it. Baptists need to give more direct attention to fostering the health of congregations and to that relatively new discipline known as 'congregational studies'.²²

Within this, the issue of how we understand and practise church membership is crucial for a spirituality that values the communal. In face of the current reluctance to embrace the demands of church membership ought we to lessen the demands we make upon people or defy contemporary trends by increasing them? What we have seen in Anabaptism might encourage us to upgrade our understanding of what is involved in being a church member even if this means that the number of 'members' will be considerably fewer than the number of worshippers in our churches. In addition to the cultural presumption that seeks to avoid committed forms of institutional belonging there surfaces from time to time in our churches a resistance to the concept of membership on the grounds that it is not 'biblical'. This claim needs to be both conceded and resisted. Church membership as practised by Baptist congregations in the West clearly reflects the nature of organisations and societies in post-industrial societies. In this sense it is hard to claim it is 'biblical'. On the other hand, Christian discipleship entails devoting oneself to the Christian community and living out one's life as part of it, and this is thoroughly biblical in concept and expectation.²³ Formal patterns of church membership are simply more or less useful ways of achieving this end. Furthermore, the notion of covenant commitment is deeply rooted in Baptist church life and overwhelms the tendency to see membership in the more bureaucratic terms of 'having one's name on the roll'. Baptists need to decide whether membership is something worth preserving, and if so how to do so.

In another place I have argued that as a matter of fact, people belong to congregations in different ways and that these forms of belonging need to be recognised.²⁴ This might mean, for instance, celebrating and making more of

²¹ Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002)

²² Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead, eds., *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

²³ Acts 2: 42.

²⁴ Nigel G. Wright, *New Baptists New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), chapter 5.

'community membership' whilst simultaneously strengthening 'covenant membership'. This suggestion follows the well-established tendency to distinguish between 'members' and 'adherents', although it adds a little more dignity to the latter. It enables churches to affirm the broader forms of belonging to a church community, which themselves are formative and in many cases essential preparation for embracing commitment, whilst setting before people the more demanding challenge of covenant membership, which some might call 'stakeholder' membership, as an appropriate further step of commitment. Allied with proper forms of education and formation this might at least ensure that at the core of our congregations are those who take seriously both the concept and the practice of living under the rule of Christ. Perhaps in the midst of discussions about 'emergent church' we ought now to begin to talk about 're-emergent church', that is to say a re-appropriation of classical themes of church as ordered and disciplined community with a strong emphasis on the place of the sacraments, preaching, membership and the ministry.²⁵ This need not be seen as a challenge to the concept of emergent churches, but it would be a stimulus to ensure that new expressions of church do not depart from a commitment both to the congregation as an essential expression of Christian life and to an 'ecclesial minimum' without which such expressions would not be 'church'.²⁶ Neither should a return to the classical be seen as shirking the challenge of change but rather as embracing that challenge as classical Christian themes are re-appropriated in new forms. For instance, to celebrate the ministry of preaching need not mean that we continue with the old patterns of monologue and 'pulpiteering' but find the ways in which preaching can be made vital and dynamic for today's context.

In this discussion however there remains an elephant in the room. The subject of church discipline and the problems associated with it are considerable and yet unavoidable if we are to take seriously the notion of being 'under the rule of Christ' with all its implications for a way of life that is intentional, serious and disciplined. It is beyond doubt that our Baptist forbears regarded church membership as a covenant in which they agreed to walk together according to a common rule of morality and life. The traditional language of 'watching over one another in love' held good both for what we today would regard as pastoral care and support and for guarding one another from moral lapse. Departures from what was perceived to be godly were for the church to discuss and to act upon in and through the church meeting. All sanctions that involved force or compulsion were of course renounced, but the sanctions of disapproval, rebuke and, as a last resort, excommunication were retained. It was understood and accepted that

²⁵ I am grateful to Dr Roger Standing for the term and idea of the 're-emergent church'.

²⁶ For the concept of the ecclesial minimum see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp.127-158. It might be recognised that the emerging or 'emergent' church movement is a diverse phenomenon parts of which can be marked by severely critical attitudes towards traditional and contemporary expressions of the church as it has been inherited: John Drane, 'The Emerging Church', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Volume 6 Number 1 (2006), pp. 3-11.

this discipline was part of belonging to a congregation. Now it is a topic we prefer to skirt around.

The reasons for such reticence are not hard to fathom. Who wants to be thought to interfere in the lives of others? For that matter, in our anonymous and mobile society, who really knows what is going on in the lives of others, especially those whom we might only see irregularly? Older patterns of church discipline depended on being part of relatively small congregations where the members would both know and observe each other's lives on a continuing basis. This is not well adapted to contemporary life in church or society. Experience suggests that even where there are close pastoral relationships or structures of accountability there can also be secretive patterns of behaviour. How then might church discipline be reconceived in a world where the 'observed life' is a rarity?

An immediate suggestion is to recast discipline within the broader framework of discipleship. The church is a community of disciples, of those who have declared their intention through baptism of living as disciples of Christ. Churches are Christian communities which first gather disciples and then offer the support and resources to endure in this discipleship throughout one's life. Church members are those who have declared their allegiance to a particular congregation to accept it as their own community of reference and to support its missionary objectives. If it is the case that such a community is open at the edges and ready to welcome many as 'community members', it nonetheless needs to take care in preparing people for 'covenant membership' since these are they on whom the persistence of the church depends. At this point more instruction needs to be given about what it means to be in covenant with each other and that to do this entails embracing intentionally a rule of life. Church membership is not something that should be entered into passively but with high levels of understanding about what it means and what it requires, including the fact that while rejecting any right to control, it does bestow upon the community the right to advise, warn and in extreme cases exclude. If this in turn means that fewer people embrace its demands this need not be of undue concern since quality must sometimes outrank quantity, although in an ideal world one would hope not to have to choose between the two. However, may it not be the case that precisely because it is seen as a rigorous calling, committed church membership acquires a different kind of attractiveness, one which will cut across the grain of our supposedly uncommitted culture?

The third challenge for Baptist spirituality to be derived from Anabaptism concerns how we might envisage what it might mean to follow after Christ. Certainly, when seeking a moral vision from the scriptures, we need to avoid the all too common tendency to search the scriptures for guidance without reference to their interpretative centre in Christ. It is by no means that the scriptures as a whole have nothing to say to us, but rather that even what the scriptures have to say must pass through the 'narrow defile' which is Jesus Christ in order to be fully grasped. Yet we also err if we take following after Jesus to mean literal

adherence to a series of rules or laws handed to us by him. Even here there is a hermeneutical process which is not always easy to negotiate. Many people remind themselves of the demands of Christ by wearing the bracelet with 'WWJD' on it: What Would Jesus Do? It is not a bad question to ask, but answering it requires imagination as well as obedience. Even Jesus lived within a context. How do we extract from his way of living that which endures for us in contexts widely different from his own?

We can begin to answer this by remembering that the NT itself refers us in imitating Christ not to the incidentals of his time and place but to the whole trajectory of his life and death expressed in taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient unto death.²⁷ It is the shape of Christ's life which is our primary datum for discipleship and this might take us beyond a merely legal interpretation. When in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells his disciples not to resist evildoers but to turn the other cheek, to give away the cloak and to walk the extra mile,²⁸ are these universal laws for all situations, the possible embracing of a permanent victim-hood? Or are they not rather, as Walter Wink suggests, specific, creative and indeed humorous examples of a 'third way' beyond retaliation and subjection to oppression, a way which refuses to mirror the evil which is done?²⁹ If this is the case then those who live in the spirit of Jesus are doing far more than juridically applying universal rules to situations where they do not fit. Rather they are practising a form of spirituality. Out of lives formed by an intimate knowledge of the way of Jesus and its application in the context of his own life, they are living in the Spirit of Christ now and trusting for those creative and imaginative ways of finding the third way beyond the recycling of evil and the acceptance of de-humanising victim-hood. I particularly like Wink's contemporary example of how such inspiration and wit might work:

Bishop Desmond Tutu was walking by a construction site on a temporary sidewalk the width of one person. A white man appeared at the other end, recognized Tutu, and said, 'I don't give way to gorillas.' At which Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and said, 'Ah yes, but I do.'³⁰

Such inspirations do not emerge out of a legalistic approach to the teaching of Jesus which can be legislated into every conceivable context but only out of a spirituality or a formation which understands the shape and intention of Jesus' life and which is vitally open to following after him on the trajectory he pursued on his way to the cross. The inspiration of the Spirit is essential to such a lifestyle. Towards such a Christ-centred and Spirit-inspired spirituality we press on.

²⁷ Phil 2: 1-11; I Pet 2: 18-25.

²⁸ Matt 5: 38-42.

²⁹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175-193.

³⁰ *Engaging the Powers*, p. 191.

Core values

If the latter section of this chapter has concerned itself with programmatic suggestions of how Baptist spirituality might be stimulated by its interaction with Anabaptism, this final part offers a specific and modest proposal that could have an immediate impact upon Baptist spirituality and ethos.

Some years ago the Baptist Union published a document entitled *5 Core Values for a Gospel People*. The values identified Baptist Christians as sharing in a prophetic, an inclusive, a sacrificial, a missionary and a worshipping community. The document has been widely studied in churches and regularly praised by other denominations. There can be no doubt as to its formative value. Each of the values represents a legitimate and wholesome aspiration, although in another place I have raised the question, following the Archbishop of Canterbury, as to whether it is possible for a confessional and morally committed movement to define itself as 'inclusive' in unambiguous terms.³¹ Given that at some point a Christian church must exclude beliefs and behaviours it considers at variance with its basic commitments, it might be more accurate and more honest to substitute the word 'welcoming' for 'inclusive'. This aside, there is another concern.

The concern is that when certain values are placed in the foreground other values and beliefs are assumed in the background. Over time the values that are stated tend to become detached from the other values and beliefs on which they are in fact dependent. It is of interest to note how *5 Core Values* has tended to become '*the 5 Core Values*' of the Baptist Union. The original title avoided the assumption that the five were the sum total of values. When the number five becomes fixed the danger is that the ethos and spirituality they inform becomes lopsided. In this chapter I wish to propose that the document *5 Core Values* be now revisited and revised as a constructive denominational exercise and into this discussion I wish to place two further values for consideration: *faithfulness* and *freedom*.

Christian people are called to be *faithful*, to hold fast to Jesus Christ and the truth as it is in him. This entails both biblical and doctrinal fidelity to the apostolic testimony as contained first of all in the scriptures, then in the Great Tradition of the catholic faith,³² and then in that variant of the catholic Christian faith which is the Baptist movement. Being under the rule of Christ involves living in continuity with that of God which is made known in Jesus Christ and such continuity is one of belief and practice. This value needs to be stated and not simply assumed since all the other values that are espoused have their fountainhead here. Moreover, there are worrying signs that Baptists as a whole are no longer

³¹ 'Inclusively exclusive', *Talk Magazine*, Spring 2007

³² Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), p. 14. Olson also calls this the 'strong central core of identifiable Christian belief', p. 31.

reading their Bibles seriously and are losing the ability to discuss their faith doctrinally as distinct from experientially. By contrast with former generations, the present generation of Baptists compares unfavourably in terms of both biblical and theological literacy and for the sake of our spiritual health this needs to be reversed.

Christian people are called into *freedom*. The freedom is granted in Jesus Christ. 'For freedom Christ has set us free'.³³ Baptist origins are to be found in the movement towards a church freed from the sacred and ecclesiastical power of the establishment and in the impetus towards a society freed from monarchical tyranny. But this freedom is freedom under the rule of Christ, not the pretended freedoms of moral licence or political anarchism. Whatever may previously have been said in this chapter about the church as an ordered community or the practice of church discipline, this must all be read as a means towards maximising the freedom in Christ of the community of disciples, not to its diminution.

Revisiting and recasting the core values of the Baptist Union is opportune. Such a step would give impetus to the continuing and much needed renewal of this communion of churches. It would assist us in truly becoming a free people under the rule of a gracious Lord and could shape our spirituality for the journey which lies before us.

³³ Galatians 5:1