

REFORMATION TODAY

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- ▶ Christ in You
(Colossians 1:27-29)
- ▶ Why did
Particular Baptists
stop baptising
infants?
- ▶ Christian Liberty?
- ▶ A Promise of Peace

The Believers' Church





16



31

38

Inside this Issue

- 05** Christ in You: The Implications of Union with Christ as a Corporate Reality
Luke Jenner
- 16** Why did Particular Baptists stop baptising infants?
Matthew C Bingham
- 26** Book Reviews
Kees van Kralingen
- 31** Christian Liberty?
John Benton
- 38** A Promise of Peace
Stan K Evers
- 41** News
- 45** African Pastors' Conference News

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Editorial

KEES VAN KRALINGEN

The Believers' Church

The previous issue of *RT* carried the theme 'In Christ all things hold together'. As was already alluded to in that issue, this is particularly true for the Church as a whole and for every local Church. Christ is the Head of his Church.

The local Church is also a believers' Church. This was the theme of the last Carey Ministers' Conference in January 2018. The addresses at this conference are of fundamental importance to the Reformed Baptist Churches worldwide. For this reason, we want to publish them in *Reformation Today*. We have already had a first instalment in the previous issue of *RT* in the form of Robert Strivens' article on 'Independency and Inter-dependency: Associations of Particular Baptist Churches yesterday and today'. In this issue, I am pleased to offer you three more contributions by Luke Jenner, Matthew Bingham and John Benton.

Our view on the believers' Church is based on several passages in the New Testament. We read about the first phase of the life of the New Testament Church in the book of Acts. This book gives us a fascinating account of the beginnings right from the day of Pentecost. The brief description at the end of Acts 2 already lays down the essential elements of what it is to be a believers' Church: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the celebration of the Lord's supper, and prayer (Acts 2:42). The message of the apostles is underlined by signs and wonders, an example of which we find in

Acts 3. This introduces another section in the book of Acts describing three major challenges to the new Church: external pressure and persecution (Acts 4 and 5), internal issues of discipline (Acts 5) and the organisation of the work of the Church in terms of the balance between the vital ministry of the word and of prayer, and the practical outworking in terms of serving the needs of the people in the Church. Following the accounts of the martyrdom of Stephen and the remarkable conversion of Saul, we read about the next phase in the life of the early Church. The Church starts to spread out according to Jesus' words in Acts 1:8. This is not just a matter of the geographical expansion of the Church, but also indicates that the gospel now goes to all kinds of people groups: not only to the Jews and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, but also to the people in the countryside, the Samaritans (and given their origin, this includes descendants from the northern ten tribes of Israel), and to the ends of the earth encompassing the Gentiles, people of all nations. The acceptance and the implications of this last point is another major step in the development of the Church. But once this was sorted out, the planting of new churches happened rapidly as we are told about Paul's missionary journeys. The preliminary climax of the movement takes place in Rome and is described at the end of Acts. The book's last words are 'without hindrance,' referring to the continuation of the bold proclamation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.



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In the letters which make up the remainder of the New Testament we read more about the principles governing the believers' Church. In many cases this teaching is presented in the form of metaphors, mental pictures which teach important truths about the Church and the way it should function. Examples are the picture of the Church as the body of Christ, the family of God, a building, a temple, a royal priesthood and holy nation, and there are several others.

Another important functional description is the Church as the pillar and foundation of the truth. The truth is compared to the beautifully decorated ceiling of a temple as used to be the case in those days. The pillars of the temple are holding up the roof so that everyone can see it. The foundation carries the structure and provides stability. These pictures indicate the vitally important role of the Church with regard to the truth.

Luke Jenner takes another important passage to challenge us with the teaching of the New Testament on the believers' Church. In a way, this points to the most important truth of all, as Luke takes Colossians 1:27 as the basis for his address/article. This text points to the glorious truth of 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. The 'you' in this text is plural, and this has tremendously important implications for our view of the Church, as Luke points out.

Matthew Bingham describes the rediscovery of the principle of the believers' Church in the 17th century. This is a fascinating history which we do well to remember. The key message is that

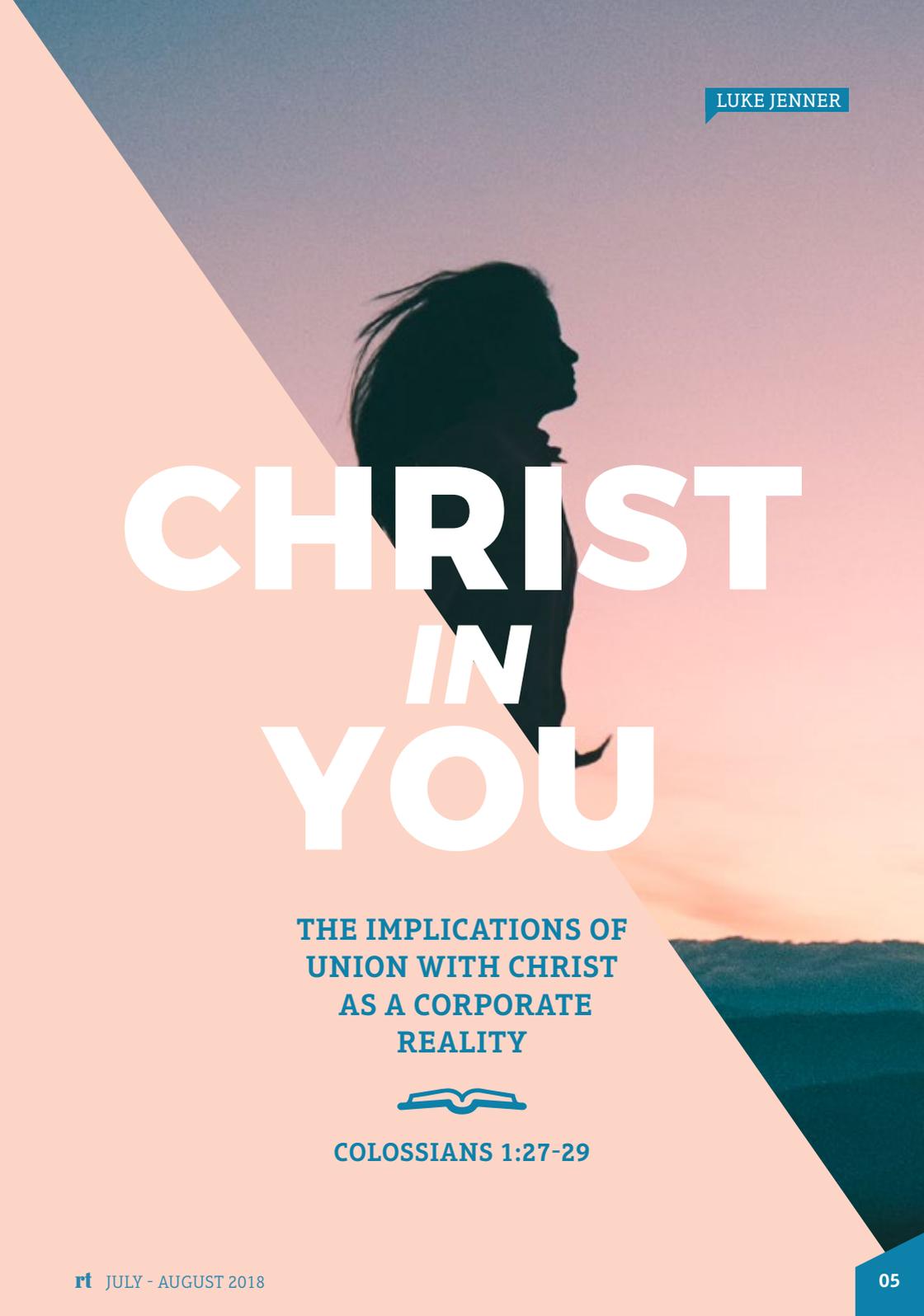
the Particular Baptists did not just come into being because of the view of baptism itself, but because of the view of the Church.

As indicated above, even the early Church described in the Book of Acts did already face challenges with regard to its practice. A continuing issue is the question of Christian liberty: what are the Lord's binding commandments and what are the areas of freedom of opinion, and how should people of different persuasions regarding such matters treat one another in a Christ-like spirit? John Benton addresses this topic in his exposition of part of the letter to the Romans, using his wealth of pastoral experience.

The article by Stan Evers on the priestly benediction of Numbers 6 fits very well with the theme of this issue as the author draws lines to the New Testament and the way this blessing now functions for us in Christ.

As in most issues of *RT*, attention is drawn to new books. We are nowadays blessed with a continuing stream of excellent books. There is no space in *RT* to mention them all, but our policy is to point to books which are of particular importance to pastors and church leaders. Two books are reviewed in this issue and they are both related to the theme of this issue, as you will no doubt recognise.

Finally, this issue is supplemented with news about some local churches in various parts of the world. May the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Head of the Church, bless us all as we try to serve the believers' Church. ■



CHRIST IN YOU

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF
UNION WITH CHRIST
AS A CORPORATE
REALITY**



COLOSSIANS 1:27-29

To be, or not to be ... in Christ: that is the question. It is the question of questions. It is the question that today divides the population of our nation, and even your home congregation, into two utterly polar opposites. In Adam ... In Christ. It is the question which, when your eyes are opened to the Christ of the question, enriches everything. It is the question that must always be held before our eyes with crystal clear conviction as we preach the gospel, serve the church and seek to reach the world. It is the question that will determine everything for you and your friends and your people on the last day of the world. In the last analysis, this is the only question that really matters. Everything else traces back here. *To be, or not to be ... in Christ*. That is the question.

I should immediately say that it's also a question which I stole. To rephrase Hamlet in that way was Dutch theologian Hans Burger's idea, not mine.¹ He and many others should get the credit for stimulating my own thinking on this pivotal and remarkable subject, especially Marcus Johnson.²

And it is a pivotal subject. Many will be familiar with John Murray's statement about union with Christ in *Redemption*

Accomplished and Applied that 'nothing is more central or basic'.³ Less well known but equally worth pondering is Todd Billings' assertion that union with Christ 'is theological shorthand for the gospel itself'.⁴ Misunderstand it, or lose sight of it, and quite simply we lose the gospel.

TO BE, OR
NOT TO BE
... IN CHRIST.
THAT IS THE
QUESTION.

But we don't need to. Union with Christ isn't somehow hidden away in Scripture, easy to miss if you're not looking. The New Testament is as full as a Frenchman's cheeseboard with it. If you know anything about the French and cheese, you'll know that not just abundance but variety is the order of the day.

We have a wonderful French woman in our church. As I understand it, when she first came to these shores, sometimes at mealtimes she'd be asked if she'd like some cheese. She would readily agree but was somewhat taken aback when what appeared from the kitchen was one solitary lump of cheddar. That, for her, was far, far from being a true cheeseboard!

Nor is union with Christ like that. It is, rather, a heavily-laden smorgasbord, a buffet marshalling all manner of phrases, concepts, images, and words – some of them newly minted for the purpose out of sheer semantic necessity.⁵ Union with

Christ is Pauline, Johannine, Petrine; Robert Peterson argues that it's even there in some form in Luke-Acts, the other Synoptics, Hebrews, and even the Old Testament.⁶ So we find that we are *in* Christ, and Christ *in* us; we share in Christ, *speak* in Christ, *abide* in Christ, participate in the *blood* of Christ; our life is *hidden* with Christ, we have *put on* Christ, we will be the *dead* in Christ, we will *reign* with Christ, we become people's *parents* and *siblings* in Christ; are *betrothed* to Christ, are one *flesh* with Christ, are the branches to his vine, the limbs to his body, the stones to his temple. *We were slain* on his cross. We were embalmed in his grave clothes. We walked out of his tomb. *We did!* When he did. We are even one with him in a manner that's somehow analogous to *how he is one with his Father* (John 17:23).⁷

This is why Paul can speak of all this in sum, in Colossians 1:27, as '*the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you*'. Though it is basically axiomatic in the literature that no single text can get close to saying *everything* about union with Christ, I still want to ground everything we consider in these three verses: Colossians 1:27-29.

'To them [the saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his

energy that he powerfully works within me' (ESV).

Of course a biblical 'mystery' is not something shadowy or hidden, but something that was *previously* hidden, and now revealed (see 1:26-27a). So union with Christ is an open secret, to be found, explored, and enjoyed. *You're* the saints! It's for *you!* That's what the text says. Yet that's not to say it thereby becomes somehow completely *fathomable* to us. Change the text to Ephesians 5:31-32: do you completely get how the join between Christ and his people is portrayed by the sexual union of a husband and wife? It's a profound *mystery*. So yes, the curtain *has* been raised on this; but what we have been granted to see *behind* it staggers our minds and overflows our hearts. The second person of the Trinity in *you*. *Us in him*. You will not be able to grasp it all, and neither shall I. But 'the fact that we can't get to the bottom of this ocean doesn't mean we shouldn't put our feet in, or even swim'.⁸ So let's try. There are three things that this text impresses upon us about this amazing truth.

1. There is no blessing outside of Christ.

In verse 27c Paul does something very important. He doesn't say, 'Christ in you, who gives you the hope of glory.' Rather, this mystery is simply 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. 'Christ in you' and 'the hope of glory' are *distinct* enough to be described by two sets of words; yet they are close enough for one to be functionally

¹ Hans Burger, *Being In Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 1.

² See Marcus Peter Johnson, *One With Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013) – an outstanding treatment, and rare in the literature for devoting an entire chapter to the ecclesiological significance of union with Christ.

³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), 161.

⁴ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1.

⁵ I am referring here in particular to Paul's well-known syn- compounds (eg *syζōopoieō*, 'make alive together with', found in texts like Eph 2:5).

⁶ See Robert A Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

⁷ And this list is by no means exhaustive.

⁸ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Eastbourne: David C Cook, 2016), 43.

identified with and unfolded by the other. Saying that the Colossians experience the hope of glory is for Paul simply a *different way* of saying that the *person* of Christ dwells in them. That principle can and should be applied to *any other* blessing of the gospel: it cannot be ‘abstracted from the living person of Christ’ dwelling in us.⁹ Hence Calvin’s famous and foundational opening to Book III of the *Institutes* (entitled, significantly, ‘The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ’):

‘As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.’¹⁰

I’m sure most of us would say we agree with Calvin. But what about in practice? See if you agree with Marcus Johnson: we too often

‘[conceive of salvation] as the reception of *something* Christ has acquired for us rather than the reception of the living Christ ... the offer of a depersonalized benefit (eg grace, justification, eternal life) rather than the offer of the very person... Christ *for* us without Christ *in* us.’¹¹

He terms it the ‘objectification of salvation’

and calls us to heed Calvin’s warning regarding the peril of ‘seeking in Christ something other than Christ himself’.¹² Is that something you or I do? Is that how we present the gospel for people? Do we emphasise ‘the doctrines of grace’, ‘justification by faith’, or ‘penal substitution’ (for example) in a way that actually obscures the fact that *none* of these blessings come to us outside of Christ himself?

Christ did something we could never do, went somewhere we could never go. Yet when he went there – he took us with him. What mystery!

So, for example, in John’s ‘I am’ sayings, let’s be clear that Jesus does not *open* the door for the sheep, or *turn on the tap* of the water of life, but rather *is in himself* the blessings he provides. And how do we receive them? *Reciprocal interiority* – to use Burger’s phrase.¹³ To use Jesus’s: ‘Abide in me, and I in you.’

Or take Ephesians 1:1-14, where election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, sealing with the Spirit – indeed, ‘every spiritual blessing’ – are all and only ‘in Christ’. You know this so well already, but tell me, when you last spoke about the forgiveness of sins, did you speak about a transaction – ‘how it’s done’ – or did you lift up Jesus Christ? Preachers, when you last preached about election, did you proclaim a process or a person? None of these blessings apply to

the church outside the person of Christ. Because by definition the gospel is found *in* him.

Have you ever been to Disneyland? I haven’t. But I’ve seen enough adverts to know that Mickey Mouse lives there. That is to say, there’s a guy there (or a girl, of course) who every day dresses up in a Mickey Mouse *suit*. Now this guy might just happen to be really ugly. Or he might go to work the day after his girlfriend has left him, looking glum as glue inside that thing; but either way he’ll *still* have scores of children run up to him and hug him and have their photo taken with him. Because children love and choose and embrace *Mickey*; and that person is in Mickey.¹⁴

Get it? God loves and chooses *Christ*, and embraces *Christ*, and sanctifies *Christ*, and in the resurrection justifies and adopts and glorifies *Christ*. He doesn’t do any of this for believers ‘directly’, so to speak. The only way that *you* come to enjoy any of those blessings is to put on – or be put in – that same Christ yourself. And if you *are* in Christ, neither your ugliness nor your mood on any particular day affects the outlook of God towards you. Because you are in the one he loves. You are included *with* him, wholesale.

But here’s the thing: Ephesians 1:4 tells us a mystery. You didn’t come to be in Christ

just when you put him on. You were in him when all there was – was God. And 1 Corinthians 15:22 tells us that you will still be in him when your graves burst open into the sunshine of the new creation, and then for ever. I’m saying that your union with Christ had no beginning ... and has no end.

But it has a great middle. As Hebrews 3:14 says, ‘we share in Christ’ – a thought expanded in 1 Corinthians 1:30, where Christ does not *bestow* ‘things’ like righteousness or sanctification as entities external to himself, but rather has himself been *made* them for us. *We* gain them by being included in him: personal, organic participants in his righteousness and sanctification.¹⁵ We often tend to focus on the representational and forensic dimensions of salvation, but Paul doesn’t shrink from describing it in *participatory* categories.¹⁶ Yes, Christ died for us, but *we also died with him*: and this is integral to Paul’s foundation for both justification and sanctification. Union with Christ means we were really (mysteriously, but really) cursed and dead at Golgotha, because we were in him when he was, on our behalf. It’s not a legal fiction: because it’s not a fiction. We hold this mystery in tension: for us, Christ did something we could never do, went somewhere we could never go. Yet when he went there – he took us with him. What mystery!¹⁷ So we’ve already died under the wrath of

⁹ Johnson, *One with Christ*, 16.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics, vols 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.1.1.

¹¹ Johnson, *One with Christ*, 17-18, emphasis original.

¹² *Ibid*, 18.

¹³ Burger, *Being in Christ*, 318.

¹⁴ This illustration is adapted from Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*, 47-48.

¹⁵ For sanctification, for example, cf. John 17:19 – ‘For their sake I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.’

¹⁶ For example, in Rom 6:1-14, or 2 Cor 5:14-15.

¹⁷ This can also be put the other way round, namely: at Golgotha, Jesus was taken somewhere he could never go – hell. How did he end up there? Because we were in him, and that’s where we deserve to be. Mystery on mystery! But this is how close (and how powerful) union with Christ really is.

God, already risen in glory. Because we *share in Christ*. The person is the benefits. There is no blessing outside of him.

What do we do with all this? We do what Paul says *he* did. The pastoral fruit of union with Christ, described in this way in verse 27, is that we do not proclaim election or adoption or forgiveness or even grace. '*Him* we proclaim' (v28). Christ and his blessings belong together, and will arrive together. So seek first his person, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Personally I find this easiest to do from the Gospels. As a church recently we have been so blessed to work through the Gospel of Luke, just basking in the glory of the person, the character of Christ. Maybe I was influenced in this by a Welshman. When at university I sat for three years under the preaching of Pastor Geoff Thomas, one of the men most full of Christ I have ever had the honour to know. On my first Sunday morning, in Fresher's Week, he preached from Mark 1:1. By the end of my degree he'd got half way through chapter 14. I relished every Sunday. I had found the man I want: not Geoff. Jesus. On one occasion I remember him urging us passionately as he unfolded the glory of Christ from another section of Mark's Gospel. He reached a climax, and leaned over the pulpit. It's embedded on my mind. He was pleading: 'Why won't you have him? What's wrong with him?'

Brothers and sisters, let's cry out for the Spirit of Christ in our lives and ministries, so that no one who knows *us* will have a good answer to that question.

2. There is no union outside the church.

So what I apparently *haven't* been doing yet is expounding how this great theme relates to the local church. Except I have been, all along. I have taken great pains always to speak in the plural: we, us, you (pl). That's because nothing of what I've said so far applies directly to you (sing.) as an individual. Nothing.

I said it like that to get your attention. Now let me nuance and qualify it. *I am convinced from Scripture that the magnificent reality of union with Christ we've been considering operates primarily and fundamentally with respect to the entire church as a corporate, organic whole, and only secondarily and derivatively with respect to individual Christians, inasmuch as they can be considered part of that organic whole.*

Think about our text, where Paul's three-word summary of union with Christ is presented corporately, not individualistically (v27): *Christos en humin* (ie 'you' plural). Or consider how he immediately applies that theological concept in verse 28: with repeated concern *for the entire church without exception* (ie 'everyone' appears three times in rapid succession). If you were to work through the entire Pauline and Johannine corpuses (as I sought to do in preparation for this message), noting all the 'union with Christ' terminology, you'd find about 80% of it to be expressed corporately, and 20% individually.

So it's not that Paul *never* says things like 'I know a *man* [ie just one] in Christ' or 'I have been crucified with Christ';

but such instances are significantly in the minority, and should thus be set within the framework of a consistently *corporate* understanding of the *church's* union with Christ *en masse*. Or return again to Ephesians 1: it's 'us' who are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ, 'us' who chosen in him, 'us' who are adopted in him. You might say, 'Yes, but Paul's *naturally* going to use plural language when unfolding these concepts, because more often than not he's writing to *churches*, not individuals.' Correct. *Then* the question is, *Why did* he communicate theology like that? *Why isn't* the New Testament composed of the letter to Rufus, to Phoebe, to Stephanas – but of letters to churches and to pastors of churches, talking about churches? *Why is* theology and practice primarily expounded and applied into *corporate* contexts?

It's because salvation itself – union with Christ – is a corporate act. In it, we do retain our individual personalities, which is why Rufus, Phoebe, and Stephanas can be genuinely and specifically addressed *within* the letters; but they do not possess their Christian identities in a manner that can be divorced from their inclusion in the entire body of Christ.

Christmas leftovers: bit by bit we work through the remains of the turkey and cake. In the end the festive supplies dwindle down to almost nothing. So it was, the other day, that a solitary, lonely mince pie looked up longingly from an otherwise empty plate, like the last boy to get picked up from school. And a member of the household took pity on it with the unwittingly salvific words, 'I'm just going

to rescue that mince pie.' And thus was it rescued.

But I took the trouble afterwards to examine the packet of that particular deep-filled *Aldi* confection. I found that what had been rescued was in fact an amalgam of a great array of ingredients: sugar, apple puree, sultanas, gelling agent, lemon peel, mixed spice, dextrose, rapeseed oil, malt extract, 'raising agents', potassium sorbate, and twenty-seven other diverse and wonderful chemicals. Some parts no doubt could have been distinguished from others by the eater: a raisin isn't pastry. Still the eater did not enter a union with each of its constituent parts separately, but with the entire mince pie. The point is that in rescuing it (by union with it) you rescue the whole thing or not at all. Otherwise you haven't rescued it: you haven't completed the mission.

Now unfortunately for Paul and John and Peter there were no mince pies around in the first century. But there were plenty of other metaphors to draw on for conveying union with Christ. They could have, I suppose, chosen – say – a *cartwheel*, where each spoke is united individually to a central hub. But they didn't. They chose singularities. A bride. A body. A vine. A temple.

You see, in the cartwheel idea, it is only through each spoke's individual union with the hub that any one spoke has a kind of derivative connection to any other. You could *take away* a spoke (or indeed many) and the union of the remaining spokes with the hub still remains completely unaffected. But that would not convey *at all* what the New Testament

writers wanted to convey when they spoke of union with Christ.¹⁸

On the contrary, by using images that invoked what you might call 'corporate singularities', the authors of the New Testament laid out the remarkable truth of the matter: Christ is united to the whole, 'all at once', or to nothing at all. Yes, each of the singularities drawn upon has genuinely distinguishable parts: limbs, branches, stones. But those parts do not experience union with the husband, the head, the cornerstone all as separate individuals: only as a corporate whole.

So in 2 Corinthians 11:2, for example, Paul speaks of presenting the bride – all the Corinthian believers *together* – to Christ as a pure virgin. Not her finger, and her kneecap, and her earlobe, but *her*. A bride without a chin or an arm or an eye is not fit to be presented. In other words, unless the whole church is involved as a unit, the union does not take place at all. That is why Paul uses the very same word¹⁹ in our text (verse 28) with this universal application: 'that we may present everyone mature in Christ'. And then the soterio-marital union is so complete that Christ is said to become one

flesh with his people (Eph 5:31). They are as he is. Hence the body metaphor, where (for example) in 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul writes, '*Just as the body is one and has many members ... so it is with – not 'the church' – 'so it is with Christ.'*

And this is why defined, believing membership of the church matters – because the church really is the body of no one less than Christ, on earth.

In other words, the union between Christ and his people is so close that Christ himself can be described here as his body, his church – no more, no less. Even though Christ and the church are distinct, there is an entire mutual indwelling and participation akin to the *perichoretic* indwelling of the distinct persons of the Trinity.²⁰ Remember Jesus's words to his disciples: 'In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20). This is how our Lord could halt that arch-

ravager of the church on the Damascus road and say with absolute truth, 'You're persecuting me'.

And this is why defined, believing membership of the church matters – because the church really is the body of no one less than Christ, on earth. This is why Peter didn't preach just 'Repent' on the day of Pentecost, but 'Repent and be baptised!' It's why the process of interviewing new applicants for

membership, and voting on their inclusion at a church members' meeting, is no mere formality. It is affirming the highest mystery in the universe. There have been a lot of votes covered by our media in the past 18 months or so, and all presented as terribly significant. Be that as it may, they all pale into nothingness beside that time you put up your hand in some little back room at your church building to say, 'Yes, I believe this person should be known as part of Christ.' In Europe, out of Europe – what does it matter, ultimately? Your little church is IN CHRIST.

3. There is no person outside your calling.

It's my sincere hope that what I've been saying has been giving you a solid theological foundation for much else that's being said or written with respect to the importance of the believing church, and indeed for your own practice in church life. I pray that it scratches where many are itching. Certainly just now books proliferate lamenting the individualism of modern Christianity, or exhorting us to the recovery of genuine biblical community.²¹ My favourite 'lament' quote is from Nicolas Perrin: 'At its worst, Western Protestantism has functionally defaulted to a notion that views the church as little more than a loose association of Jesus's Facebook friends.'²² Might the idea of corporate

union with Christ help to undermine that notion? Or maybe it could drive some gentle changes in church life that would help ...

Michael Horton describes some church services as basically collections of Christians all having a personal relationship with Jesus at the same time, in the same place.²³ I think particularly the way many of us celebrate 'communion' looks like that: heads down, me and Jesus. At Grace, Halifax we've tried to alter some of that – by sitting in a circle round the table, by looking at each other when we say the grace, by having times of open prayer for each other. These things are not rocket science and no doubt lots of you are way ahead of us already in this kind of thing.

I'm also of the opinion that gently altering some of the highly individualistic songs we sing would be a great help too. I'm not talking about the modern ones (though some of those could do with a corporate spruce-up too). Would it not gently help our sense of corporate union with Christ to sing '*And can it be that we should gain ...*' or '*Our hope is built on nothing less ...*'? As James Thompson says: 'The church is not a collection of individuals who devote themselves to spiritual formation, but a community that shares the destiny of Christ together.'²⁴ Each singing member

¹⁸ I grant that Jesus does speak of 'taking away' branches in the vine image (e.g. John 15:2), and the meaning of that needs to be both reckoned with and carefully exegeted; but all the same the point is not negated that Christ's union with the vine operates with regard to the organism as a whole rather than as a collection of individual, unconnected branches that just happen to be growing in close proximity to each other.

¹⁹ Gk. *paristēmi*, 'to present'.

²⁰ This concept is expounded at length in a fascinating monograph by James D Gifford, Jr., *Perichoretic Salvation: The Believer's Union with Christ as a Third Type of Perichoresis* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

²¹ Good examples include, from this side of the pond, Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A radical reshaping around gospel and community* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), and Graham Beynon, *God's New Community: New Testament Patterns for Today's Church* (Nottingham: IVP, 2005); and from the other side, Joseph H Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Community* (Nashville, B&H, 2009) and Brett McCracken, *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017).

²² Quoted in James Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 7.

²³ Michael Horton, 'Union with Christ and the Communion of Saints' – sermon video accessed 11.12.17 at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/union-with-christ-and-the-communion-of-saints>]

²⁴ Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 125.

of the congregation at a Sunday worship service does not exist in some kind of personalised Smarties-tube, directing their praise vertically to God but quarantined from the other worshippers around them. No; we *worship* together: as a body, a bride, a living temple. Perhaps there are other ways you can come up with that would reinforce and help that sense of united worship.

Certainly Paul's own *self*-application in Colossians 1 is not to be missed: 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.' (v28). He is convinced that Christ has not united himself to the church piecemeal: so he, Paul, will not commit himself to the church in that manner either. But note: that makes it tough. 'For this I *toil* ...' (v29). It would be nice, wouldn't it, to just concentrate on the maturity of the church members who are really up for it. But the fact that the church is united to Christ as a whole will simply not allow you to do that. There are the weak and the slow and the proud and the frustrating as well. 'Everyone.' Because of corporate union with Christ, there is no person – no person in Christ, I mean – outside your calling.

But note how Paul's own personal, derivative union with Christ, his own experience of resurrection-power within him, is held in tension with this similarly derivative fellowship in Christ's sufferings: 'For this I toil, struggling *with all his*

energy that he powerfully works within me' (verse 29). Both together are harnessed in the service of the whole church. Yes, it's toil, but it's also awesome – because of union with Christ. In his sufferings. In his resurrection-power. And all so that no one may be left out when it comes to present the church mature in Christ.

Who are you being tempted to leave out? Don't do it. Who are you being tempted to allow to shrivel up or even die? Pray for grace! Oh, the *struggle* of working, with others (NB Paul says 'that we may present everyone mature ...'), for the good of the entire church. But we must.

I was very taken with a satire invented by the comedian Emo Phillips about divisions in the church. Let me adapt it for this paper:

I was walking over a bridge one day and saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, 'Stop! Don't do it!' He said, 'Why shouldn't I?' I replied, 'Well, there's so much to live for.'

'Like what?'
'Well, I'm a Christian, and I believe...'
'Actually, I'm a Christian too,' he said.
'Really?' I said. 'Great! Are you... perhaps... a Catholic?'
'No, I'm Protestant.'
'Really? Me too! C of E, perhaps?'
'No actually, I'm free church.'
'Wow, that's great... Any particular kind of free church?'

Would it not gently help our sense of corporate union with Christ to sing 'And can it be that we should gain ...' or 'Our hope is built on nothing less ...'?

'Baptist.'
'Baptist! Fantastic! Reformed Baptist or General Baptist?'
'Reformed Baptist.'
'That's brilliant!' I said. 'Closed table or open table?'
'Open table.'
I pushed him off myself.²⁵

The thing is, the problem usually isn't about whether someone is open table or closed table. It's when they can't be bothered to come to the table at all. Or when they won't look at you over the table. Or when they feel they can't come to the table because they feel too guilty. Or when you hope they might not actually turn up to the table because they're making such trouble for you or others and it's just so awkward being in the same room as them. *That's* when we're tempted most just to push them off. To let them fall, far away from Christ. When they're hard work. *That's* when the temptation is to not struggle with all the energy that Christ so powerfully works within us, that we might present *everyone* mature in him.

We so easily forget that if people are real believers, they are members of Christ, which means that they cannot ever be written off. Because *they were there* at Golgotha. They were there, just as you were there, in the *same* broken body.

And there was no sense in which *you* participated differently to *them* in that monumental act. It wasn't 'the mature ones were really, properly there, but the immature ones ...'

We so easily forget that if people are real believers, they are members of Christ, which means that they cannot ever be written off. Because *they were there* at Golgotha. They were there, just as you were there, in the *same* broken body.

No. They were there. You were there. Together.

They were also there, *with you*, in him, that Easter morning outside Jerusalem, utterly triumphant over hell and the grave. *They* were! When the women held onto *him* they were clutching every member of your church, including you. All of you together. That is the reality, the glory, the joy – and the challenge – of corporate union with Christ.

So who is standing on the bridge back home? How are you feeling about them? Like allowing them to fall? Like even *pushing them off*?

But who here would dare lift a finger against any part of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, except, like those women, to *embrace* him?

Do you know what that means? It means embracing the church. ■

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²⁵ The original version of this tale appears in Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 32-33.



Why did Particular Baptists stop baptising infants?

Combining the 'Why' and the 'When' of Believers' Baptism in Early Modern England

Note: The following article briefly summarises some of the points made by the author in his 2018 Carey Conference lectures. The same themes are explored in even greater depth in the book: Matthew C Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

As Reformed Baptists we believe that only believers are fit subjects for baptism. This strikes most of us as a conclusion straightforwardly drawn from the New Testament. Yet for the better part of Christianity's two thousand-year history, most Bible readers have not drawn such a conclusion, the general consensus being that both believers and their children were fit subjects for baptism. Though the theological justifications offered in defence of the practice have varied considerably, that infants ought to be baptised has remained a constant.²⁶ This only began to change in England during the seventeenth century when some English Puritans began to question the longstanding practice of paedobaptism. In 1644 a group of fifteen such innovative Puritans in London signed a confession of faith stating their belief that baptism was 'to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith'.²⁷ With this statement of faith (and its more famous follow-up, formally adopted in 1689), these Puritan pastors launched a Calvinistic or Particular Baptist movement that

continues on into the present day. Yet for all of their considerable successes, these early Baptists were not well received by their contemporaries, and aspects of their origins continue to remain obscure. Consider an illustrative incident involving one of mid-seventeenth-century London's most influential Baptist ministers, William Kiffen. In 1645 Kiffen found himself embroiled in a pastoral crisis. Some years earlier, a young woman named Elizabeth Poole had sought and was granted membership in Kiffen's Baptist church. But this ecclesiastical transfer was decidedly not appreciated by the woman's father, the Presbyterian Robert Poole. The elder Poole wrote to Kiffen, demanding that he 'receive satisfaction' from Kiffen on the grounds that he had 'seduc[ed]' his daughter 'into [his] errors'. Poole was infuriated by Kiffen and his 'pretended Church', accusing the Baptist of 'being a Seducer, a Blasphemer, and such like termes.' At the root of Poole's anger was his belief that Kiffen was a false teacher leading a false church, and Poole demanded to know how the Kiffen

²⁶ See David F Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

²⁷ 'The London Confession, 1644' in William L Lumpkin and Bill J Leonard eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 155.

could 'vindicate by the Word of God [his] Anabaptisticall way, from the sinfull guile of notorious Schisme, and defection from all the Reformed Churches'.²⁸

Kiffen replied at some length to Poole, and his answers helpfully illustrate some of the ways in which the early English Particular Baptists defended their independent churches and their practice of believers' baptism. But the incident also captures something else, something vital to Baptist identity and yet too often passed over superficially. Namely, the exchange between Poole and Kiffen highlights the radical nature of what early English Baptists were doing. To reject paedobaptism in early modern England was to break not just with the history of the English church, but with Christendom more generally. Moreover, by refusing to baptise their infants, the members of Kiffen's church were aligning themselves – at least in the eyes of their opponents – with continental Anabaptists, a group associated by these opponents with both heterodox theology and wanton immorality.

These circumstances would have loomed large in the mind of anyone associated with the early Baptist movement. Yet, in our own day, because of our historical distance from the seventeenth century, we are constantly in danger of forgetting just how radical a thing it was to reject paedobaptism. In our own day, believers' baptism is a thoroughly mainstream

theological position, one championed by a host of denominations, seminaries, and para-church organisations. According to one recent estimate, the United States alone boasts over 37 million self-described 'Baptists', and when one adds to these the millions of Christians who identify with traditions like Pentecostalism that typically join with Baptists in rejecting paedobaptism, the number of believers around the world who embrace believers' baptism swells to a very substantial share of the global Christian church.²⁹

Such impressive growth over the past three-and-a-half centuries is something that the theological heirs of William Kiffen can justifiably celebrate. Yet in doing so we must also fight to maintain our sense of just how odd it was for the early English Baptists to do what they did during the 1640s. This is important because if we fail to recognise the strangeness of their decision to reject paedobaptism we will also fail to think deeply about what combination of historical and theological factors led them to do what they did. It's far too easy to simply say that the early English Baptists rejected paedobaptism because they did not find the practice in their Bibles. There is truth to that analysis, but, as this article will explore, it is also incomplete and inadequate. And, moreover, to argue that the early English Baptists rejected infant baptism because they did not believe it was taught in Scripture does not tell us anything about why so many English Puritans began the

Baptist revolution during the 1640s rather than, say, the 1620s or the 1680s.

In the following paragraphs we will think through these ideas in three steps. First, we will try to recover some sense of just how shocking it was for someone like William Kiffen to embrace believers' baptism and why this theological position seemed so outrageous to a man like Robert Poole. Second, we will think about why *Sola Scriptura* cannot fully explain the sudden emergence of Baptists in mid-seventeenth-century England and gesture briefly toward a better answer to the question of why the early English Baptists rejected paedobaptism when and how they did. Then we will conclude by asking how these reflections might encourage the church in our day.

Part 1: The Outrage of 'Anabaptism'

When Robert Poole vigorously denounced William Kiffen and the London Particular Baptists as heretical false prophets, he was expressing an opinion with which almost all of his contemporaries would have readily agreed. Though seventeenth-century British churchmen disagreed on many points, they would have found common ground in their fear of and disdain for anyone rejecting paedobaptism. The Scottish Presbyterian and Westminster Assembly commissioner Robert Baillie, for example, described the

In our own day, because of our historical distance from the seventeenth century, we are constantly in danger of forgetting just how radical a thing it was to reject paedobaptism.

Baptist position as the 'true fountaine' out of which flowed all of the 'errors which for the time doe trouble the Church of England'. Baillie and his contemporaries believed that Baptists were controlled by a 'malign ... spirit', 'a spirit as much opposite to the honour of God, and to the salvation of men, as any that ever troubled the Church since its first foundation'. He believed that Baptists were guilty of 'the greatest errors and the grossest vices that ever any

who were called Christians have stumbled upon'.³⁰ Such vitriol was regularly directed towards Baptists during the seventeenth century. But from where was this disdain coming and how did the rhetorical temperature get turned up so high?

To understand just how outrageous the early English Baptists must have seemed to their contemporaries, one must begin by understanding just how monolithic the Christian witness on the issue of baptism had been. Though historians disagree about the baptismal practices of the earliest Christians, there is little doubt that from at least the third century onwards, infant baptism quickly became the standard practice of both the eastern and western churches. Here, then, was a very rare thing indeed: a practice that would have garnered nearly universal assent across the Christian spectrum. The historical lack of opposition to infant

²⁸ William Kiffen, *A Briefe Remonstrance of the Reasons and Grounds of Those People Commonly Called Anabaptists* (London: 1645), 1-3.

²⁹ David W Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 3.

³⁰ Robert Baillie, *Anabaptism, The True Fountaine of Independency, Antinomy, Brownisme, Familisme* (London: 1647), title page, 129.

baptism becomes most impressive when one recalls that even such bulwarks of Christian consensus like Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology spawned vigorous and enduring dissenting traditions. Thus, when intrepid individuals like William Kiffen began to advocate believers' baptism during the 1640s, they were, as the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch notes, presenting an argument that 'had hardly ever been made before in Christian history'.³¹

To make matters even more difficult for the early English Baptists, the only recent historical precedent for the baptistic position came from continental Anabaptists, a group that loomed large in the English imagination as a terrifying symbol of theological and moral anarchy. Various Anabaptist groups across Europe rejected paedobaptism during the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, however, many of the most prominent Anabaptists also rejected elements of Christian orthodoxy right along with the practice of baptising infants. Among these, by far the most notorious was a group of radical firebrands led by the prophet and self-appointed 'king of righteousness' John of Leiden. In 1534 John of Leiden and his followers captured the city of Münster, Germany and established a brutal theocratic regime that brought with it the confiscation of private property, forced polygamy, and

the execution of any so bold as to protest. And though the uprising in Münster was swiftly dismantled by besieging troops, the association between Baptists and lawlessness proved far more durable. Those rejecting infant baptism were fiercely persecuted throughout the continent, and John Calvin spoke for the magisterial Reformation as a whole when he lambasted the Anabaptists for leading people into a 'bottomless pit' of 'false opinions and errors'.³²

This was the world into which William Kiffen and his fellow-travellers attempted to launch their new Baptist movement in 1644. Indeed, it was with this very legacy of hostility toward 'Anabaptism' in mind that the London Baptists attempted an early modern public relations effort by entitling their confession of faith, 'The Confession of Faith, of Those Churches Which Are Commonly (Though Falsly) Called Anabaptists'.³³ Such efforts to distance themselves from continental Anabaptists were, however, largely ineffectual, and the early London Baptists were routinely smeared as men and women who 'follow those pestilent hereticks called Anabaptists in Germany, who sprung up there ... not very long since, about Luther's time'.³⁴

Part 2: *Sola Scriptura* and the Rejection of Paedobaptism

With this cultural and religious context in view, we are better prepared to appreciate

what a bold thing it was for the earliest English Baptists to publicly take the stance they did. Those of us today who understand believers' baptism to be the biblically faithful position owe a great debt to the early modern men and women who took such risks to publicly promote the doctrine for the first time. But this also raises questions about why they made this provocative departure from received orthodoxy. To some that might not initially seem like a very interesting question, or at least one that has a rather obvious answer. After all, one might reply, doesn't the Bible clearly teach that the way one becomes a Christian is by heeding the apostolic command to 'repent and be baptised' (Acts 2:38)? And is it not the case that the New Testament contains no clear command to baptise one's children, nor a single explicit example of an infant being baptised? Doesn't the silence of the New Testament on the topic of infant baptism combined with the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* adequately explain why so many mid-seventeenth-century Puritans rejected paedobaptism?

Most historians who have studied the topic seem to have drawn this very conclusion. One scholar expresses it like this: 'Put most simply, the Baptists asked their critics to accept what they found an unalterable fact: infant baptism had no scriptural warrant. Because they found no express biblical injunction for paedobaptism, Baptists insisted that the ordinance was reserved for adults'.³⁵

Surely no Baptist today will argue with this basic logic, and, indeed, the early English Baptists were quick to press these and similar points in their published works. The influential London Baptist, John Spilsbery, for instance, wrote that 'there is neither command nor example for the baptizing of infants in all the New Testament', and almost every other seventeenth-century defence of believers' baptism contains similar assertions.³⁶

But, as true as the preceding statements might be, such explanations of the Baptist revolution in early modern England are incomplete. This is because appeals to the silence of the New Testament and *Sola Scriptura* do not actually help us understand the timing of the early English Baptists' abandonment of their long-held commitment to baptising infants. Or, to put it another way, appeals to the simple biblical case for believers' baptism do not help us understand why the first English Particular Baptists emerged when they did. This is because in early modern England everyone said that they were simply trying to follow the Bible. Everyone, paedobaptists and Baptists alike, maintained that theirs was the position taught in Scripture. Everyone involved in these debates understood himself or herself to be animated by the spirit of William Chillingworth's 1638 rallying cry that 'the Bible only ... is the Religion of Protestants'.³⁷ If an explanation accounts for everything, then it cannot meaningfully account

³¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 622.

³² John Calvin, *A Short Instruction for to Arme All Good Christian People Agaynst the Pestiferous Errors of the Common Secte of Anabaptistes* (London: 1549).

³³ Lumpkin and Leonard, 141.

³⁴ Immanuel Knutton, *Seven Questions about the Controversie Between the Church of England and the Separatists and Anabaptists, Breifely Discussed* (London: 1645), 23.

³⁵ Philip F Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620-1660* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 94.

³⁶ John Spilsbery, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism* (London: 1643), 25.

for anything. And so to say that an English Puritan disagreed with a given theological position because he found it unbiblical ends up being true, but not interestingly so.

Furthermore, while English Puritans only began to seriously question paedobaptism during the late 1630s, Reformed Protestants had understood for a long time that there were no explicit examples of infant baptism in the New Testament. So while it is true to say that Baptists rejected paedobaptism as unbiblical, saying that does not tell you why certain men and women started to reject paedobaptism when they did. Why during the late 1630s? Why not a decade before? Why not fifty years later? The Bible was not changing and people had known for a long, long time that the New Testament lacks any explicit examples of, or commands for, infant baptism.

To reach a more compelling explanation of why Puritans began abandoning paedobaptism when they did we must locate early modern baptismal debates within the wider theological context out of which those debates arose. The historian Edmund Morgan wisely observes that 'change in Christian thought has usually been a matter of

emphasis, of giving certain ideas a greater weight than was previously accorded them or of carrying one idea to its logical conclusion at the expense of another'.³⁸ When this more nuanced approach to doctrinal change is applied to the baptistic revolution that led to the signing of the First London Baptist Confession in 1644, what we find is that debates about baptism were really, in the first instance, debates about the nature of the church.

What we find is that debates about baptism were really, in the first instance, debates about the nature of the church.

Though fully exploring this issue goes well beyond the scope of the present article, we can at least attempt a basic sketch.³⁹ The key insight for understanding why believers' baptism suddenly seemed intellectually plausible to many Puritans during the 1640s is the recognition that all of the men who signed the 1644 London Confession were Congregationalists before they were Baptists. That is to say, every one of the fifteen signatories had already abandoned the English national church and had embraced a Congregational ecclesiology well before they were prepared to abandon paedobaptism. The shift in ecclesiology created a context in which believers' baptism began to seem logically inescapable to a growing number of Puritans.

Indeed, most of the men signing the Baptist Confession were connected in one way or another to Henry Jessey's Independent congregation in Southwark. Launched in 1616, this London congregation was one of the first and most important English Independent churches. The congregation's founding pastor, Henry Jacob, explained that a true New Testament church consisted of 'a number of faithful people joined by their willing consent in a spiritual outward society or body politic, ordinarily coming together into one place'.⁴⁰ With its insistence that each congregation be comprised exclusively of believers, this statement captured the essence of Congregationalism, and it was precisely this ecclesiology that reappeared in the first London Baptist Confession. The 1644 Baptist Confession described the church as 'a company of visible Saints, called and separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith'.⁴¹ The men who signed the 1644 Confession had long been followers of the 'Congregational way', and it was that ecclesiological context that helped give rise to the rediscovery of believers' baptism.

But what, exactly, did this insistence upon a believers' church have to do with believers' baptism? The opposite of a believers' church is a comprehensive, national church, that is, a church in which state citizenship and church membership are effectively inseparable. This is what England

had in the seventeenth century: to be born English was to be born into the Church of England. And under such an arrangement, the logic of infant baptism made perfect sense: if the national church wishes to include every citizen, then universal infant baptism ensures universal church membership. But if one questions the validity of a national church and begins instead to see the New Testament model as one in which believers come together voluntarily to form congregations, then the logic of infant baptism becomes more difficult to maintain. After all, if the only proper church members were, as Congregationalists maintained, those 'visible Saints' who could make a credible profession of faith, then why should churches confer a sort of quasi-membership upon infants who could do no such thing?

When one reads seventeenth-century Particular Baptist polemic with this Congregational background in view, one quickly begins to notice that questions about church membership and about the believers' church are consistently and strikingly reflected throughout their published arguments. Moreover, early Particular Baptist writers would often explicitly link their rejection of paedobaptism with their rejection of the national, comprehensive church. For example, one year after Samuel Richardson signed the 1644 London Baptist Confession, he explained that infant baptism 'tends to a Nationall

³⁷ William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (Oxford: 1638), 375.

³⁸ Edmund S Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas, 1558-1794* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003), xiii.

³⁹ For a fuller answer to these questions, please see the author's 2018 Carey Conference lectures and his forthcoming book, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press); 'From National to Believers' Church', The Carey Conference 2018, Swanwick, <http://www.reformation-today.org/talks-2018/>.

⁴⁰ Henry Jacob, *A Confession and Protestation of the Faith of Certain Christians in England* (Amsterdam, 1616), article 4.

⁴¹ Lumpkin and Leonard, 153.

Church' and 'upholds a Nationall Church, as Circumcision did of old'.⁴² His fellow 1644 signatory Paul Hobson similarly complained that 'the Baptising of Infants makes them Members of their Church [ie the Church of England], before they are called of God'. To support his claim, Hobson appealed to 1 Corinthians 1:2, a classic Congregational proof-text in that it describes the Corinthian church as composed of 'them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints'.

As the seventeenth century progressed, Particular Baptists continued to recognise the way in which support for the idea of a comprehensive, national church inevitably reinforced paedobaptism. Early modern Baptists argued that the idea of a national church in which one's citizenship in the kingdom implied one's membership in the church was essentially an Old Testament notion. Ancient Israel was characterised by precisely such an arrangement, but one of the peculiar glories of the New Covenant was the way in which it brought about a church based upon spiritual re-birth rather than national, natural birth. Particular Baptist minister Benjamin Keach wrote: 'Now in the old Will or old Testament, Infants were admitted to this Privilege of Church-Membership in that Legal or National Church of the Jews; and National Church-Privileges are now made null and void by the Gospel-Covenant which is Christ's last Will and Testament, in which Infant Church-Membership is quite left out, their Names not being mentioned, as

having right to any Gospel-Ordinance, as Baptism, the Lord's Supper, etc.'⁴³

If we want to understand why English Particular Baptists appeared when they did, we must locate them within their Congregational context. The ecclesiological shift preceded the sacramental shift and, indeed, it was the former that made plausible the latter. The embrace of a believers' church created a theological context in which believers' baptism was not only conceptually possible, but, for the first time in Christendom's long history, logically necessary.

Part 3: Conclusion

Such historical-theological reflections are, to some, interesting in and of themselves, but, I would argue, they are also relevant to those active in Baptist ministry today. Reformed Baptists often are tempted to embrace paedobaptism because most of our favourite theologians and pastors from past centuries held the position. The Christian thinkers who taught many of us how to best read our Bibles – individuals like John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and John Owen – all baptised infants. But historical reflections such as we've been pursuing in the preceding paragraphs should encourage us to hold fast to our doctrine of believers' baptism.

Though we have only scratched the surface, we have attempted to establish at least two major facts about the doctrine of believers' baptism and its relationship to church history. First, we have seen that

anyone hoping to biblically reconsider the validity of infant baptism would have faced overwhelming hostility from the surrounding culture. It took tremendous courage and conviction for the early English Baptists to defy all social expectation and publicly endorse their baptistic confession of faith in 1644. Moreover, as we have seen, much of the vitriol directed toward early modern Baptists had more to do with the radical actions of Anabaptists in Münster than sound exegesis. The takeaway is that when we look through the history of Christianity and see relatively few Baptist voices, we should also recognise the degree to which the absence of a Baptist witness was conditioned by socio-political factors that have little to do with 'rightly dividing the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15).

Second, we have also sketched a connection between the rise of Congregational ecclesiology and the rise of baptistic sacramentology. Namely, we've discussed how infant baptism fits hand-in-glove with a comprehensive national church. But, if this connection is sound, it presents a difficulty for our contemporary paedobaptist friends insofar as almost none of them continue to support the idea of a strong, national church. Today our Presbyterian brothers and sisters, for example, essentially affirm as we do that the church is a voluntary association of believers. There is a sense in which all of us, Baptist or otherwise, have adopted the key Congregational tenet that all members of the church ought to be visible saints. However, if the historical analysis offered here and elsewhere is correct, then this Congregational conviction erodes the logic of paedobaptism and should

encourage us to hold fast to the same line of reasoning that led the signatories of the 1644 London Baptist Confession to reject the practice altogether.

We have come a long way from the days in which a Baptist like William Kiffen and a Presbyterian like Robert Poole would have excoriated one another over baptismal differences. But by reflecting carefully on the historical and cultural contexts out of which their dispute arose, we can better understand both their theological positions and the ways in which they impinge upon our own. ■

Additional note by the author:

The vast majority of people spell the name of Kiffen as 'Kiffin.' Both spellings can be found within the historical sources. However, most often when his name appears in early modern documents, it is spelled 'Kiffen'. For example, when the 1644 Confession lists the names of the men subscribing, his name appears as 'Kiffen' with the 'e'. So, following that, I prefer the 'e' spelling and have used that spelling in my work. This has also been the practice, for example, of Larry Kreitzer (Regent's Park, Oxford) in his recent work on William Kiffen and His World.

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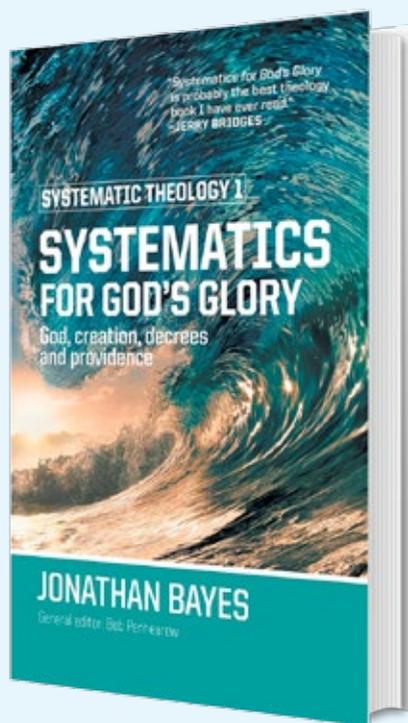
⁴² Samuel Richardson, *Some Brief Considerations on Doctor Featley* (London: 1645), 14.

⁴³ Benjamin Keach, *Light Broke Forth in Wales, Expelling Darkness* (London: 1696), 66-7; I am most grateful to Austin Walker for drawing my attention to this passage from Keach.

Systematics for God's Glory

Part 1: God, Creation, Decrees and Providence

Author: Jonathan Bayes
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 Pages: 256



The author is the UK Executive Director of Carey Outreach Ministries (see www.careyoutreach.org), who may be known to the readers of *Reformation Today* from his involvement in the Concert of Prayer in the UK, his interest in the topic of revival (see his article in *RT 272*, and the review of his book on revival in *RT 281*). He is also the author of this book on Systematic Theology which is intended to be the first volume in a trilogy. It had appeared already in 2012 (paperback version in 2013) but was never reviewed in *RT*. With this review, I want to draw attention to this remarkable book featuring a fresh and new approach to writing a systematic theology.

The unique approach stems from the author's firm conviction that the only source book for systematic theology is the Bible. The task of systematic theology is to bring together the various doctrines taught in Scripture. This is often done with reference to particular texts of Scripture which support the formulation of a particular doctrine. Dr Bayes takes a different approach and starts every chapter with a careful exegesis of relevant parts of Scripture before formulating the doctrine in question. The great benefit of this approach is that the doctrines arise more naturally out of Scripture, and this underlines the thesis that Scripture is the only source book for systematic theology.

This exegetical part is extremely valuable and whets the appetite for even more. Given the limitations of the size of the book, the author has done an excellent job by taking this approach.

The second part of every chapter presents the teaching on a particular subject in the key creeds and confessions. Depending on the topic, the confessions covered include the early creeds, the great confessions from the time of the Reformation, and some modern confessions such as those by Reformed churches in India and China (thus reflecting the author's global outlook!).

The third part of every chapter is devoted to a discussion of the historical development of the doctrine. This is done by discussing some classical statements on the doctrine from different eras of church history.

These two parts together offer clear expressions of the doctrine in question and help the reader to understand how its formulation has developed over the centuries.

The final part of every chapter addresses practical and pastoral application following Paul's exhortation in 2 Timothy 3:17. This aspect receives further prominence as each of these four parts in every chapter ends with a summary and personal application using headings such as 'remember', 'reflect', and 'rejoice'.

Although some of these features are also found in other systematic theologies, the

strong and rigorously exegetical basis laid in this book is unique. This approach benefits the reader's personal edification, but also offers stimulating thoughts for preaching, and teaching these doctrines.

This book as part 1 of the series covers the doctrines of God, of the Trinity, of revelation in Scripture, of revelation in creation, of creation in its origin, of creation in its present condition, of divine decrees, of providence.

Given the book's modest size and the space given to the exegetical part, means there must be limitations somewhere else. There is therefore less interaction with other (erratic or heretical) views than in some other systematic theology books. An example is the absence of a discussion or conclusion on the controversy between the Eastern and Western church on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (due to appear in volume 3). Another example is the absence of a discussion of the still influential view of Karl Barth on Scripture. The emphasis of the book is clearly on the positive presentation of the biblical view on the doctrines covered.

This means that the treatment of this part of systematic theology is not exhaustive, but what is offered by the author is of excellent quality. The way this lucidly written book explains the truth of this part of the Christian faith informs the mind and warms the heart. The book is highly recommended and I am looking forward to the next two volumes! ■

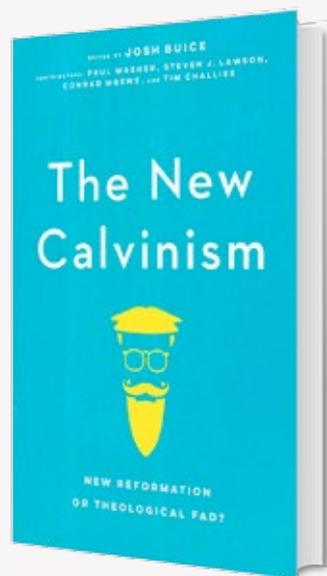
The New Calvinism

New Reformation or Theological Fad?

Author: Josh Buice (Ed)
Publisher: Fearn: CFP, 2017
ISBN: ISBN 978-1-5271-0090-9
Pages: 127

This small book offers a description and a careful assessment of the movement now known as New Calvinism. The book is edited by Josh Buice and has contributions by Paul Washer, Steven J Lawson, Conrad Mbewe and Tim Challies. Buice defines the movement and its main characteristics as follows: 'The New Calvinism movement is a broad network that spans across geographic, racial and denominational boundaries with a high view of God, a profound love for God's Word, a distaste for shallow pragmatism, a commitment to complementarianism, and a true passion for the nations to know Christ.' The movement generally has a high view of Scripture and a commitment to its inerrancy and authority. As the movement looks at the problems of our current society because of drugs, poverty, divorce and life-shattering sins, there is a great need for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

According to the editor of the book there is much to be profoundly grateful for, but there is also reason for concern. There is evidence in some cases of a lack of a desire for holiness and devotion to Christ.



Another danger is the neglect of the importance of the local church. The book therefore attempts both to compliment and to critique this movement.

Buice himself focuses his contribution on the continued battle to maintain the authority and sufficiency of Scripture over and against the temptation to let pragmatism rule for the sake of cultural relevance. He calls us to stay faithful to Scripture and to keep our confidence in God's Word and the primacy of preaching. Paul Washer explains the doctrine of the church and argues that a robust commitment to the local Church is essential for the New Calvinism to survive. The risk is that because of the tremendous opportunities of the modern social media (which also offer real blessings), people may reduce or even relinquish their involvement in the local church. People are tempted to move from one conference to the next, and from one

celebrity speaker to the other, instead of seeking their spiritual nourishment in the local church and contributing themselves to the ministry and life of their church. Paul Washer gives a timely reminder to maintain a healthy biblical focus on the biblical importance of the local church.

Steven Lawson gratefully recognises the attention for Reformed doctrine, the five Solas of the Reformation and the doctrines of grace in New Calvinism. He reminds us, however, that a considerable part of Scripture is also devoted to the question of how to live the Christian life. We should not forget the biblical emphasis on sanctification. He calls the readers to a holy passion for God. He concludes his chapter as follows: 'May God grant much sanctifying grace to this exciting awakening known as New Calvinism. May he mature and reform the lives of all who are Young, Restless and Reformed (quoting the title of Collin Hansen's well-known book). And may they live radically separated lives.'

Zambian pastor Conrad Mbewe notices that many in this movement recognise the need for the Holy Spirit to bless the ministry of the gospel. He notices, however, that some seek to fulfil this need by turning to an unbiblical emphasis on the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. Conrad argues from the New Testament for a cautious cessationism in line with classical Reformed doctrine as this points us to a more healthy understanding of the ministry of the Holy Spirit and how to seek his blessing. He commends the movement for seeking more life and heat as he says: 'There is nothing as off-putting as someone speaking about

"amazing grace" as if he is sitting on a cube of ice.' But he rightly pleads that the New Calvinists should remain firmly rooted in the Scriptures, especially as they seek spiritual empowerment.

In the final chapter, Tim Challies also recognises many blessings in this movement as already mentioned above, but he calls for discernment and the need to avoid the weaknesses such as the risk to want to become trendy, to cultivate a celebrity culture, and to be happy with cold theology. Other challenges are to draw the boundaries too loose or too tight regarding the question who belongs to it. The classical pitfalls of both legalism and antinomianism are also mentioned.

It is worth quoting part of the final conclusion from this last chapter: 'If New Calvinism is simply a trend, a movement, or a marketing machine then by all means, let's let it die. But if New Calvinism really does represent doctrine that the Bible makes plain, if it really does represent people who are committed to glorifying God by living for the good of others, then let's determine that we will rejoice in and press into the many evidences of God's grace, and let's determine that we will look for and address the potential weaknesses. Let's be relentless in our pursuit of God and his glory for the good of all the nations.'

This small book is very informative and gives a well-argued, discerning and balanced view of this fascinating and encouraging development whilst sounding appropriate warnings for the weaknesses, and the risks and challenges ahead. ■

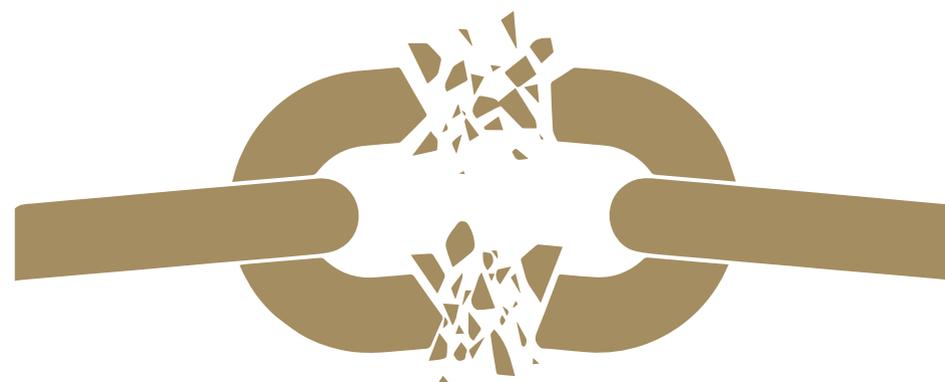
New Books

The following books have been published recently and are recommended for your attention:

- Kuldip Singh Gangar, *Foundations of the Gospel. A Believer's Commentary on Genesis 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 271 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-588-6.
 - Gerald M Bilkes, *Reservoirs of Strength. Lessons from the Book of James* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 104 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-574-9.
 - Bruce McLennan, *McCheyne's Dundee* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 183 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-590-9.
 - Sarah Ivill, *The Covenantal Life. Appreciating the Beauty of Theology and Community* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 134 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-592-3.
 - John Crotts, *Graciousness. Tempering Truth with Love* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 137 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-586-2.
 - Brian G Hedges, *Watchfulness. Recovering a Lost Spiritual Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 175 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-594-7.
 - Brian A Russell, *Behold My Servant. The Servant Songs of Isaiah* (Fearn: CFP, 2017), 218 pages, ISBN 978-1-78191-890-6.
- And also from *Grace Publications Trust* in the Series *Grace Essentials* (abbreviated versions of Christian Classics):
- Richard Baxter, *The Ministry We Need. The Reformed Pastor* (Fearn: CFP, 2017), 167 pages, ISBN 978-1-5271-0103-6.
 - J C Ryle, *Aspects of Holiness* (Ryle's book on Holiness) (Fearn: CFP, 2017), 167 pages, ISBN 978-1-5271-0104-3.

Please note that we are unable to supply these books; please contact your local bookshop.

JOHN BENTON



CHRISTIAN LIBERTY?



ROMANS 14:1 – 15:13

It was said during the Cold War that behind the Iron Curtain the secret police always went around in threes. One could read. One could write. And the other was there to keep an eye on the other two dangerous intellectuals! Communism sought a society of complete uniformity with no dissidents or people who thought for themselves. Some pastors would like churches like that! But that's not Christian

freedom. God made us individuals. Christian liberty includes being free to live according to our consciences, what we are 'convinced of in our own mind' (Romans 14:5).

But being part of society is bound to bring some restrictions to personal liberty and we are thinking about Christian liberty within the society of the church.

The view of liberty taken increasingly in Western culture is that of the philosopher John Stuart Mill. He summarises his position like this: 'The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it' (*On Liberty*). This stance which underlies much in modern secular life, is actually, of course, the kind of society desired by the elite, (like J S Mill) with power and ability to flourish in a competitive environment. It is the view generally pushed by career politicians, the elite of the secular media (with their six-figure a year salaries), and the judiciary. In terms of Romans 14 it might be seen as the natural view of the 'strong' insufficiently concerned for the 'weak'.

Paul's view is somewhat different from both Communism's totalitarianism and Mills' Utilitarianism. The church must function for the good of the individual, not just of the organisation or the Party. And contra to Western society, for the individual J S Mill basically wants freedom from others whereas Paul's vision is of a freedom to love and serve others.

We are going to briefly skip through these chapters under seven headings; try to catch Paul's vision and attempt to draw some practical conclusions.

The summary of the situation (14:1-3)

Look at vv1-3. Paul is not talking about fundamental Christian teaching here – but v1 about *dialogismis* = things which are a matter of opinion/ things you might

argue or dialogue about /disputable matters / scruples / questions to which there is no necessarily 'right' answer. And, of course, not just personal matters of conscience but many matters related to decisions taken in church meetings fall into this category.

Paul is addressing a situation about food and the Jewish calendar – which probably impinges on 'table fellowship' in the church – but verse 21, for example, implies that the principles he teaches have wider application. The background to the situation is that Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in AD49 over disturbances concerning *Chrestus*. This is mentioned in Acts 18:2. To accomplish this Claudius probably closed the *kosher* abattoirs. During this exile the church / house churches in Rome had become Gentile with Gentile leadership. Now, by the time Paul writes around AD56 Nero was emperor. The situation for the Jews had relaxed and they were beginning to come back to Rome. But returning Christian Jews, who were not pushing Old Testament food laws but just had scruples about their eating personally and were still attached to the Old Testament calendar, (that's the way they were brought up) were finding it difficult to fit in. They didn't feel at home in Gentile dominated churches and were maybe not even wanted.

So the 'strong' in the passage are those in verse 2a – that understand Old Testament culture is over and means nothing. The 'weak' are those in verse 2b. They weren't depending on keeping Old Testament laws for salvation, but that culture was part

of their Jewish identity. It meant a lot to them. And so when these scruples were ignored they felt unwanted. Therefore this was no small matter. It was threatening the very unity of the church and the faith of some individuals.

Of course this is why there is so much in Romans about Jews and Gentiles. It is Paul's big doctrinal letter, but the theme of Jew / Gentile runs throughout the whole of Romans and Paul's great explanation of the gospel, 1:16; 3:30; 9-11 etc. It is worth noting of course that in 11:17-21 Paul rebukes any arrogance of the in-grafted Gentiles boasting against the natural branches (the Jews) broken off from God's olive tree. So this is very important. At a practical level chapters 14-15 may be the climax of the letter – in the sense that it was the urgent problem that Paul is writing Romans to sort out.

It is also worth noting that as churches seek to 'progress' this Jewish / Gentile tension is enmeshed in a context of 'progress' as Christianity at this time is emerging from its Jewish roots to become a worldwide church for all nations.

Having explained God's love for us and so introduced the supreme pre-eminence of Christian love for both Jews and Gentiles in 13:8, chapters 14 and 15 are the practical application of that priority to the current situation in Rome. Paul's summary of what must be done to bring a solution is verse 3. There's liberty to be different.

That's what he's aiming at and now he brings a number of arguments / principles by which to persuade the Christians, both 'strong' and 'weak', to change and relate more helpfully to each other. These are: the Lordship of Christ; the Way of Love; the Priority of the Spirit; the Example of Christ; The Necessity of Unity; the Goal of Praise. So we look and get a glimpse of Paul's vision – I won't spend the same amount of time on all sections.

At a practical level chapters 14-15 may be the climax of the letter – in the sense that it was the urgent problem that Paul is writing Romans to sort out.

The Lordship of Christ (14:4-12)

Look at verse 4. *This section seems aimed mostly at the 'weak'* – those whose identities, and to some extent consciences, are still linked back to the rules and ways of their cultural background. They feel sidelined and so find it easy to judge / condemn (v3) the 'strong' who come across to them as somewhat lawless (and insensitive). Paul makes three basic points here.

First, he asks pointedly, 'Whose church is this?' (v4). God has accepted those people (v3). The church does not belong to the 'weak' to judge others. Neither, of course does it belong to the 'strong'. For either side to arrogate to themselves the role of judgment is incompatible with the headship of Christ and of God over his church. It is like a young child trying to boss the family instead of Dad. So stop judging. Not your place.

Second, in these disputable areas (not fundamentals) you should trust

the sincerity of those who see things differently from you (vv5-7). The Lord is 'big enough' to cope with both extremes of life and death and therefore is certainly able to embrace Christians who see things in disputable areas differently / oppositely. So, again, who do you think you are (v10) to judge or look down on your brother / strong and weak?

Third, Christians need to take seriously that we will face God's judgment (vv10b-12). This is something which gets very little airing in today's churches. We preach the day of judgment for non-Christians, but Christians, though saved, will be judged on that day. Of course we need the emphasis on God's grace and final salvation, but foolish and disobedient Christians will face shame and loss of eternal rewards on judgment day (1 Cor 3:14-15). We can imagine a tour of heaven. A lesser place? 'I insisted on the old way though times had changed – for my own comfort rather than Christ's glory.' 'I built the church by blackmail / fear – to follow the latest evangelical fashion, for my reputation.' The judgment seat for Christians would quash a lot of egos and make the weak far more careful about what they insist on. Let me remind you too that leaders especially must give an account (Heb 13:17) and be judged more strictly (Jas 3:1). Sobering?

The Way of Love (14:13-16)

Look at verses 13-15a. This section is more directly aimed at the 'strong'. I think verse 14 makes that clear. We are reminded we are in the area of non-absolutes. Eating

is only a problem if your conscience is troubled. Faith shouldn't go against conscience.

This section underlines the need for an outlook in the church which respects people for who they are, rather than who we would like them to be. 'I wish she didn't have those scruples!' Well, she has. What are you going to do about it? The way forward is not 'Well, I know best. I'll persuade her.' Paul certainly knew best. But he is not up for pushing through his 'strong' understanding. The way forward is the way of love which (v13) makes up its mind not to cause another sincere Christian to stumble (v15a).

'Oh,' you say, 'that person gets upset about anything and everything and makes a fuss.' My answer is to go back to the previous verses on God's judgment seat: 'They are less likely to insist on what is a matter of preference if they've had a good dose of teaching about facing the judgment seat of Christ.' This is God's church – not yours, not mine.

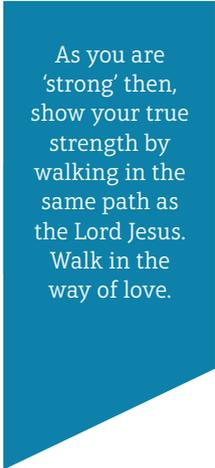
Look at verses 15b-16. 'Destroying a brother?' From a human point of view we all know of people who have felt rejected by the church and so walked away from Christ. Destroyed!

'Do not allow your good to be spoken of as evil.' Tom Schreiner argues that 'your good' is probably the gospel / the kingdom. And when people leave and churches fragment, the world and some even needy / weak church members are given plenty of reason to despise and

doubt the gospel. This is so prevalent – and notice the onus is on the strong here.

The Priority of the Spirit (14:17-23)

In my experience there are many churches today – even larger churches – where the Holy Spirit and a real sense of God is absent. We run on programmes, not the Spirit. We have forfeited God's felt presence somehow although we seem to be doing a lot of 'right' things.

Look at verses 17-18. What matters is not pleasing ourselves but pleasing God and what pleases God is the way of love. When God is pleased he will be there in the church. 'How stupid', Paul is saying, 'to forfeit God's presence for food and drink.' What is required is the *self-denial by the strong* – to build others up rather than causing them to stumble (vv19-21). If you are really offending someone's conscience, Paul is saying, at the very least 'you need to think long and hard before you "move forward"'.


So what must the strong do to prioritize the Spirit and the kingdom? You should keep your beliefs to yourself (vv22-23). Let me again quote Tom Schreiner: 'The self-denial of the strong should not be understood as a criticism of their theology. They are free to maintain their convictions in the privacy of their home or with other believers of like convictions. Furthermore, the strong

are truly blessed by God in that they are undisturbed by doubts in eating whatever they wish. By contrast the weak face condemnation if they eat (v23). The reason is that their eating does not stem from faith. Eating or drinking apart from faith is to be avoided, for any action done apart from faith constitutes sin.'

So here is one of weak conscience who under peer pressure in the church or the church meeting goes against his conscience – or else he will not feel accepted. He or she will be seen as 'rocking the boat'. The individual is damaged spiritually, alienated from the fellowship and through such pressures the church can grieve the Spirit.

The Example of Christ (15:1-4)

This teaching is obviously very tough on the 'strong'. It's not an easy thing to hold back on what you feel is right, for the sake of others. So at this point Paul encourages the strong by pointing to the example of Christ (v1-3). The quotation in verse 3 from Psalm 69:9b provides support for the exhortations of verses 1-2.

This Psalm is quoted widely in the New Testament to explain and expound the death of Christ (Matt 27:48; Mark 15:23; John 2:17; Acts 1:20; Romans 11:9).

The Lord's death is the supreme example of one who forsakes his own comfort and his own agenda in order to advance the kingdom of God. The use of this quotation,

so closely associated with the crucifixion, acts as a commentary on 14:15. As you are 'strong' then, show your true strength by walking in the same path as the Lord Jesus. Walk in the way of love. This is both difficult but also a great honour that, no doubt, will be rewarded. So (v4), be encouraged by the Scripture. 'Strong' Christian, follow Christ's example.

The Necessity of Unity (15:5,6)

Look at verses 5-6. This is a prayer for the unity of the strong and the weak. Notice that unity takes endurance which needs to be encouraged! He's not saying it's easy!

He does not pray for the weak to become strong and get over their scruples. He does not ask the strong to give up their beliefs. He is asking for a bearing with and a respecting of one another which keeps the unity – a depth of fellowship where there's liberty to disagree! – and we still speak to each other, love each other and don't cut people out.

And at this point perhaps it's appropriate to throw in the question – I don't know the answer – do the needs of unbelievers who are not part of the church take priority over those of believers who are part of the church? There is urgent need to reach out – the needs of unbelievers are immense – they are lost – heading for judgment day without Christ! Haven't these Jewish scruples got to go in the light of the need to make outsiders feel welcome in church in the great cosmopolitan city of Rome? It doesn't cross Paul's mind. But that is often the big argument for driving through change in the church these days which

may ignore many people's honest scruples. Or is the unity of a diverse church actually a greater evangelistic attraction that God can use?

Conclusions / Questions

These are in no particular order:

1. Notice that Paul has not given us a mechanical formula for unity in the church. I can't solve all the problems at a stroke! He has given us a number of principles which have to be applied. Situations are different. People are different. But what must be worked through is the Lordship of Christ, the Way of Love, the Priority of the Spirit; the Example of Christ, the Necessity of Unity, with the Goal of the Glory of God – so that Christians are free to be themselves and at the same time enjoy the society, the fellowship of a united church.
2. We are to notice the dangers with regard to ourselves. Assuming the extremes of licentiousness (insensitivity) on the one hand, and legalism do not apply to us, we may still be weak or strong or perhaps a mixture, different in different areas.

Are we dealing with each other in church with these parameters of liberty in mind? Are our church decisions made conditioned by love, and arising from faith, while understanding who we are?
3. Some small churches don't grow because their attachment to traditions which are not fundamental overrides the gospel and the Lordship of Christ.

If a pastor recognises this – how does he begin to change things? Surely Paul is saying here that relationships and love are the place to start. He's not saying that the weak can't change or shouldn't change, but he is implying that is not where you begin. But perhaps it will take time. This is not what young men in a hurry want to hear. But the priority is acceptance.

4. Does our church need more teaching on self-denial? Do we need more teaching on the judgment of Christians at the throne of Christ concerning how we have behaved in his church? Do you teach on heavenly rewards for sacrificial Christians?
5. Can we dissociate the depth of unity in a church from the quality of its decisions? Are our decisions often rushed – so cause trouble later on? We don't want to be seen to be slow - though sometimes God wants us to 'wait'. But would we actually be able to make better decisions faster if the quality of fellowship was closer and richer? And related to this, has the current evangelical culture that leaders should be 'strategic thinkers' / planners / project leaders led to a neglect of the more basic call to pastor the flock and grow a loving, unified church, which is actually able to make better decisions?
6. Leaders can be strong or weak. Some leaders of churches are 'weak'. They can't take the idea of not everyone seeing things their way, judging people, even driving them out of the

church. Some leaders of churches are 'strong'. For them it's all about pushing through what they are convinced of – despite the honest worries of others. These are insensitive and fracture churches. Leadership teams need to read Romans 14 and 15 prayerfully.

7. My perception is that most troubles in churches are not doctrinal or even moral but relational. Personal relationships go wrong. People feel oppressed. People feel they are not accepted – not wanted. They become either constant sources of discontent or eventually leave. We can't sort out all problems, we know. There is a devil. But when was the last time you preached through Romans 14 and 15? When was the last time you applied this passage to your own behaviour as a church leader? Is the neglect of this passage a root reason for many churches in trouble and pastors under stress?

So we close with Paul's prayers in this passage in verses 5,6, and 13. ■

John Benton was for 35 years the Pastor of Chertsey Street Baptist Church in Guildford, and is now the Director of Pastoral Support at the Pastors Academy of London Seminary.

A PROMISE OF PEACE

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them' (Num 6:22-27). This benediction finds an echo in several of the Psalms, such as Psalms 67:1 and 134:3: 'May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us'; 'May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!'

The storm is raging; the sea is beating against the rocks; the lightning is flashing; the thunder is roaring; the wind is blowing,

but a little bird is sound asleep in the crevice of a rock with its head tucked serenely under its wing. It sleeps in the storm! Would you like peace in life's storms? God gives peace to those who trust him.

Peace is one of the blessings promised by God in the priestly benediction at the end of Numbers 6. Peace comes to those whose lives are marked by self-denial and self-control, such as the Nazirites of whom we read in Numbers 6. We cannot expect God's peace if we don't give ourselves fully to him. The disobedient and self-willed will not know his peace.

The priestly benediction of Numbers 6 reveals sparkling facets of God's gracious dealings with his people.

God's promise

The command of God to Aaron and his sons to pronounce this benediction is equivalent to the promise of God to bestow the blessings mentioned: preservation, pardon and peace. The prayer implies a promise. This benediction is certainly a prayer because Aaron, the high priest, says, 'The LORD bless you' (v24). Aaron could not bestow blessing, but the Triune God 'has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing' including election, adoption, redemption and the Holy Spirit, whose presence in our hearts is a guarantee of an everlasting inheritance (Eph 1:3-14). The gracious God 'gives generously to all' his children (James 1:5).

God's command to pronounce a benediction came to Aaron, the Jewish high priest, who offered a sacrifice for Israel on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev 16). The priest lifted his hands stained with blood, to bless the worshippers. God blesses us through Christ, the great High Priest, who shed his blood to save us.

God's people

God does not command Aaron to bless all the nations; he only blesses the Israelites (v23). The Church, as 'the Israel of God', now enjoys the blessings and promises of this benediction (Gal 6:16). It is true that Jesus taught that God is kind to everyone, 'Your Father who is in heaven ... makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust' (Matt 5:45). However, he is only the Father of Christians; he is 'your Father', and therefore, he has a deep love for his children and looks after them with special care. The Numbers 6 benediction belongs

only to those who seek the Lord for his pardon. Do you belong to him? Is he 'your Father'?

Whom did Aaron mean when he used the word 'you' in verse 24? In English, we say 'you' when we talk to a group or when we talk to an individual. In Hebrew there is a word for addressing many and another word for speaking to someone personally. In Numbers 6:24 it is the word for talking with a person face-to-face. When Aaron pronounced the benediction on the whole nation he was also blessing each person individually. Each person is precious to God!

The Lord has an intimate knowledge and a one-to-one relationship with every one of his people. The Christian can say with the apostle Paul, 'The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20).

God's power

According to Strong's Concordance, the word 'keep' in verse 24 means 'to hedge about' and brings to mind Satan's observation when considering Job (Job 1:10-11). The sovereign God allowed Satan to take some of the hedge down to test Job. God kept this godly man during this dark affliction. This word 'kept' also anticipates the benediction of Jude 24-25, 'Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and for ever. Amen.'

There are many dangers on the journey of life, therefore we ought to pray, each

day, to our heavenly Father and mighty Defender, 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' (Matt 6:13). Those who sincerely offer this prayer will avoid walking deliberately into situations where they are liable to be tempted.

God's pleasure

The phrase 'make his face to shine upon you' (v25) alludes to the sun that gives light and heat and causes the crops to grow. It means that God is the source of spiritual life and growth.

The words 'The LORD lift up his countenance upon you' (v.26) are translated in the NIV as, 'the LORD turn his face towards you' and suggests the smiles of a parent who is pleased with his children when they do well, perhaps passing an exam at school or reaching another grade while learning to play the piano. On the other hand, the parent wears a frown when the child is disobedient. Nevertheless, 'behind a frowning providence he [God] hides a smiling face', as William Cowper proved in periods of bleakest depression.

God's pardon

Aaron prayed, 'The LORD give ... you peace' (v26) as he blessed the Israelites. Viewing this petition with New Testament eyes, we may discern three layers of God's peace. Firstly, the believer knows peace with God, 'Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5:1). Christ's death appeased God's wrath. He bore God's wrath instead of the sinner. God declared his Son guilty so that he might declare the believer not guilty. Secondly, the believer experiences the peace of God even in

adverse circumstances. The apostle Paul wrote of this peace from a prison cell in Rome, 'The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus ... The God of peace will be with you' (Phil 4:7,9). We obtain this peace through prayer. This peace brings contentment (vv6, 10-13). Jeremiah Burroughs, a 17th-century Puritan, rightly described contentment as 'a rare jewel'. We are rich indeed, if we have this jewel! Thirdly, the believer desires peace with fellow-Christians. He takes to heart Paul's exhortation to the Romans, 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all' (Rom 12:18).

God's presence

What is meant by God's promise in verse 27, 'So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them?' The phrase 'my name upon the people' means that God identifies with his people in their joys and in their sorrows. This privilege carries with it responsibility; we represent God in this world. Unbelievers judge God by our conduct. As Christians we bear Christ's name. What impression do we give of him?

This final verse in Numbers 6 is the divine Amen to Aaron's blessing, 'So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.' We ought to notice the emphatic 'I will' (v27), no devil in hell or wicked person on earth can stop the almighty God fulfilling his purposes. God is with his people; he becomes one with them. He promises to make good the blessing pronounced by the priests. ■

Stan Evers was pastor at Potton Baptist Church, Bedfordshire, UK for twenty-five years.



Carcassonne Reformed Baptist Church inaugurates its new building



After four years of searching for a new building, plus one year of administration and renovation work, we had the immense joy of inaugurating our new church premises in November 2017, accompanied by some local residents and elected officials, friends and representatives of other churches in the region, France and the UK. We celebrated the grace of God, his faithfulness and goodness towards his people. The inauguration weekend gave us an opportunity to thank all those who participated directly or indirectly in the realisation of this project, and to trace the

history of our church and its proposed activities. Presenting our Confession of Faith was a great opportunity to share the gospel with the many non-Christians present. At the end of the inauguration, guests were invited to share a copious buffet. The Christian concert on Saturday evening was well attended and very much appreciated. Many visitors who attended Saturday's events were also with us for our Sunday worship and a fellowship lunch, where they had the chance to try *Cassoulet*, a local speciality made with sausages, beans and preserved duck, apparently invented during the Hundred Years' War!

History

Having spent many years pastoring a church in Alsace, Tony and Barbara Hynes, with four of their six children, moved in 1988 to Carcassonne, a town of 45,000 inhabitants. Their aim was to help a church in Limoux and join a church-planting team in Carcassonne. Over the years, the church in Carcassonne has grown slowly but surely. Tony and Barbara retired in 2010 and continue to be active in the work. The church called Hicham (accompanied by his wife Elizabeth and their children) to lead the work as pastor. In recent years the church has grown significantly and in 2017 it relocated to its large new premises.

A huge Thank you!

We thank the Lord for many answers to prayer. Thank you to all those who have prayed about the church-building situation, and to all who support the work here in prayer and financially. We are grateful to Peter Nye for heading up the team of builder volunteers who have worked incredibly hard, transforming an empty warehouse into a comfortable meeting place. Pete's ministry, under United for Mission, is known as 'Operation Centurion'. It involves travelling around the world to advance God's kingdom through missionary/church-building projects. Without his help this project would not have been possible.

New Opportunities

Having our own premises has already enabled the church to reach out to local people in new ways. In March last year, when the church flat had been completed but the other renovations were still under way, two young ladies arrived

from England to spend three months running a Saturday children's club and helping the church in other ways. Through door-to-door work and leafleting they met many families, some of whom still attend the church and have been baptised. Since then we have had many different people staying in the church flat, especially students from Bible colleges on placements. A team of 25 Americans is coming in July to run, for the second year, a bilingual Holiday Bible Club. We pray that this will provide contact with local people. Having a larger building enables us to accommodate a bigger team for the annual week of evangelism. Last year we welcomed a team of 26 in August. This year's week of outreach will take place from 21 to 28 August. If you have a heart for the gospel and speak some French, or know someone who does, could you encourage them to participate?

The ladies' Bible Study was relaunched last year using the French translation of the Know Your Bible notes. The new building has many smaller, comfortable rooms ideal for use by small groups. One such group is a prayer meeting and Bible study in English which takes place every Wednesday morning, in addition to the various French midweek meetings. On Sundays we now use our new translation system, so that English regulars and holiday makers can sit in the service with everyone else and hear the translation through a small earpiece.

Another change is that the La Voix des Prophètes literature ministry has moved to its new offices in the church building. Packaging up literature is now a lot easier for those involved.

The church has evangelistic stalls at three different markets during the week, with good opportunities to give out literature and engage people in conversation. Our house groups are doing well, with neighbours attending who really seem to be seeking the Lord. There are quite a

few unconverted people who attend every Sunday. We pray for a work of grace in their hearts.

Hicham

www.carcassonne-baptiste.fr ■

Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies

We have reported before on the new Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies in Texas, USA (see RT281). The new seminary has now announced that it also offers Doctoral Studies in association with Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. The announcement states this as follows: Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS) and the IRBS Theological Seminary (IRBS) have agreed that the IRBS will become a Doctoral Study Centre in association with PRTS.

IRBS Theological Seminary will offer courses for PRTS's PhD program in Historical Theology and Biblical Studies to students of Reformed Baptist churches and seminaries. The degree itself will be offered through PRTS which is accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Further details can be found on the website. ■

Training of pastors in Africa

It has been recognised by many church leaders in Africa that one of the greatest needs of the church is the training of pastors. Over the last few decades many churches have been planted which often are served by pastors with little or no training and very few resources. It is great to see now how many churches and leaders take on this responsibility. There is now a proliferation of initiatives to address this urgent need. We cannot report on all of these in RT, but mention a number of those about which we have information.

The best-known example is the work of APC about which we report in almost every issue of *RT*. The work keeps on growing and the demand is more than can be accommodated with the limited resources. There is a steady stream of e-mails reaching us and asking if a conference can be held in a particular country.

A number of churches or groups of churches also arrange their own seminary or Bible schools for this purpose. This

happens in various places in Zambia, Namibia, Kenya and others.

Here, I want to mention briefly some of these initiatives in Kenya.

Bumala

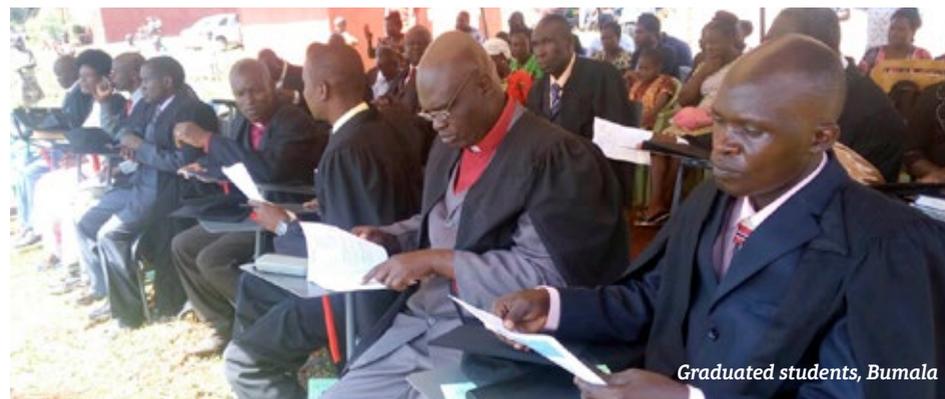
Pastor Eric Ngala of Reformed Africa Inland Church in Bumala has been active as a tutor in training pastors using material from Mukhanyo Theological College in South Africa. He has seen the fruit of his labour as in March of this year 14 students graduated with a diploma in theology.

After the successful graduation ceremony of this 2018 class, he has admitted a group of 15 pastors and another three who were ongoing; hence there are now 18 pastors starting on the new course. Another fascinating important piece of news is that Eric's son George has started to reach out to Albino people in neighbouring Tanzania. They involve the local church in this ministry by encouraging them to donate whatever they have such as clothes, maize, beans. They also buy Kiswahili Bibles and other literature for them.

Nairobi

Also in Kenya, but now in the capital Nairobi, there is Trinity Baptist Church. This church has been served for four decades by pastor Keith Underhill. The church started in his home in 1978 with a handful of people, and was constituted in 1979. Our brother Keith returned to Liverpool some years ago but still travelled to Nairobi and remained officially a pastor of the church until recently. He has now retired after four decades of serving this church and others in Kenya. This was marked by a special service and meeting of the church on the 18 March. Keith reports that this was a joyful occasion of thanksgiving to God for his faithfulness over the decades. The church is now served by Murungo Igweta and Eric Abwao as pastors. One of the special ministries of the church is Trinity Pastors' College where they also train men for the ministry. There are 12 students and Keith on his recent visit taught them the doctrine of Scripture.

Please pray for these and other initiatives of training new and existing pastors to proclaim the gospel of God's free grace in Africa. ■



Graduated students, Bumala



African Pastors' Conference News

COUNTRY	LOCATION	DELEGATES	BOOKS Sold & Free
Nigeria	Lagos Creation	63	359
Nigeria	Lagos	265	1576
Nigeria	Abuja	366	981
Nigeria	Gindiri	381	1579
Nigeria	Bukuru 1	156	714
Nigeria	Bukuru 2	62	623
Nigeria	Kaduna	120	865
Botswana	Francistown	40	318
Botswana	Gaborone	28	475
Zambia	Livingstone	58	428
Zambia	Mazabuka	53	465
Zimbabwe	Bulawayo	101	404
Zimbabwe	Kwekwe	24	166
Zimbabwe	Mutare	25	137
Zimbabwe	Harare	61	203
South Africa	Mokopane	25	326

The table gives an overview of recent conferences held in the period Jan - April 2018 and the number of books distributed.

The total distributed since the start of APC in 2006 now stands at 124,717.

The first in the list was the APC Creation Conference held at Sovereign Grace Church in Lagos, the theme being 'Creation and New Creation.'



Irving Steggles and Andy McIntosh were the speakers. The books were sent from South Africa and the Creation books were kindly sponsored by a church in the UK. Substantial discounts were given by the publishers. Following the conference, Andy spoke at two universities in Lagos.

Irving and Nico van Zyl spoke at the

following Nigerian APC in Lagos on the theme 'Preaching Salvation'. Books for all six conferences were transported from Ghana.

The transport vehicle broke down and made a number of unscheduled stops. The books arrived, to our great relief, and by God's grace, on the eve of the conference! ■



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Please make any cheques payable to 'Reformation Today'.

Donations to APC: These should be sent to Phil Roberts, 121 Hartshill Road, Hartshill, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 7LU. Cheques should be made payable to 'African Pastors' Conferences'. Could UK donors please let Phil Roberts know if they intend to use gift aid.



Further Details

Further details about individual APC conferences are available from Phil Roberts (phil@tentmaker.org.uk) or Frederick Hodgson (frederick.hodgson@gmail.com)

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Next Issue

- ▶ Special issue to commemorate the ministry of Erroll Hulse