

Baptist Union of Wales – Presidential Address, 24 June 2022

‘The bonds that bind us together’

It was an unexpected honour to be nominated for the presidency of the Baptist Union of Wales in a year when both wings of the union had decided to convene a joint meeting of their conference. This occurs only rarely, and as I am hardly well known among the English-medium churches, I was quietly amazed at the faith and good will that they expressed towards me. I promise to do my best to fulfil the obligations that both wings of the Union have so graciously put upon me.

It was a half-century ago, in 1972, when I was accepted by the West Glamorgan Association as a candidate for the ministry. At the time I was a sixth form pupil in Penlan Comprehensive School in Swansea, having been baptized some three years earlier by my minister, the late and esteemed Revd R. G. Roberts, as one of a half-dozen young people who had been brought up in Calfaria chapel in Morriston. I must admit that the great themes of the faith were at best hazy to me at the time, but I had been brought up in a Christian home and my profession of faith was, I believe, sincere. Baptism was one step on the way, not the first one – the initial step was my being taken to chapel and Sunday school as a child – but a decisive one nevertheless. I cannot but express my debt to my home church back in the 1960s and 1970s, my minister, the officers and deacons and the Sunday school teachers who cared so diligently for the young people among them. My great-grandfather, ‘Daniel Jones the tailor’, had been a founder member in 1888 and the church’s first precentor and choir master. It was there, in Calfaria, that my grandmother was baptized, there that my mother was baptized, and when the time came, it was there too that I was baptized. Such is the rock from which I am hewn, and the rich heritage that I have extolled throughout my life.

Then there were the steps that followed. Ministerial training in the North Wales Baptist College in Bangor under the tutelage of Principal D. Eirwyn Morgan and Professor George John, and experiencing the fellowship and friendship of my fellow students, a friendship which has lasted down the years. Three more years as a post-graduate student at Regent’s Park College, Oxford, researching into the history of the eighteenth-century Baptists in Wales and being confirmed into the high Baptist sacramentalism which Eirwyn Morgan – himself a proud Regent’s man – had already initiated me into at Bangor. Thereafter ordination and six highly profitable years of ministry in Carmarthenshire, at Calfaria Penygroes, Tabor Crosshands and Penrhiwgoch, before returning to North Wales in 1988 to teach Theology at Bangor University. I would like to express my thanks to Moriah church in Gaerwen and the church at Pencarneddi,

both on Anglesey, for calling me as auxiliary minister between 1989 and 1994, and then to the Coleg Gwyn, the North Wales Baptist College, for appointing me Warden alongside my responsibilities in the University, as successor to my friend, Principal John Rice Rowlands.

I need also to mention the fellowship at Penuel Bangor, its minister, my old and dear friend Olaf Davies, and the whole church where I was a member between 1995 and 2011, and where Ann, my wife, was a deacon and church secretary; and then, of course, Noddfa Lampeter and its minister, the Revd Jill Thomas, where we became members following my transfer as Professor of Theology and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. And to conclude, to the North Teifi Circuit of Churches: Noddfa Lampeter, Bethel Silian and Caersalem, Parc-y-rhos; Aberduar, Zion Cwrtnewydd and Brynhafod who called me to fulfil a ministry among them four years ago. There were two texts that were in my mind when I accepted the call, Paul's words in the 26th chapter of Acts: 'I have not been disobedient to the heavenly vision', and the words of Our Lord in Luke 17: 'We are all but unworthy servants'. And that's where I remain, as a country pastor, and am likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

What are the bonds that bind us together as Baptists in Wales? In preparing for this address, that's the question that's been constantly before me and in order to proffer an answer, I propose to draw your attention to the 'Declaration of Principle' that forms a basis for the Union's witness. Were you to go to the website and press the button that says 'What we believe', you will find the following three clauses;

1. That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer his laws.
2. That Christian baptism is the immersion in water into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scripture; was buried, and rose again the third day'.
3. That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.

What do you make of these? Are they a confession of faith? Are they a creed? Are these three points sufficient to bind us together in a single body of disciples professing faith in the Lord Jesus and a commitment to his cause in 21st century Wales? That's what I would like to discuss this evening under the title: 'The bonds that bind us together'.

1. The historical context

The Baptist Union of Wales was established at Llanwenarth, a few miles from Abergavenny, in 1866, and in the following year a constitution was accepted which established the sovereignty of each individual church and its right ‘to put in execution all the laws of Christ necessary to its own edification’. Among the aims of the Union were ‘to extend brotherly love and union among those Baptist ministers and churches who profess themselves as being Calvinistic and evangelical’, such being virtually all of the denomination’s churches at the time. Not all churches or all associations were keen to join – didn’t the county associations provide a sufficient platform to bind the churches together as a unified whole? – but one by one: the Breconshire Association in 1874, the Monmouthshire Association in 1879, the Glamorgan Association (a single association at the time) in 1880, and finally the Pembrokeshire Association in 1881, each joined the Union with the English-language churches of mid-Wales and the eastern valleys establishing the English-speaking wing in 1913. If you are keen to learn more, you can turn to the appropriate sections in T. M. Bassett’s authoritative *Welsh Baptists* (1977) or to the Revd Michael Collis excellent treatment in the booklet *Unity of Spirit and Bond of Peace: A Summary of the History of the Baptist Union of Wales* (2016). For the next half century or more life went on fairly uneventfully, and it was not until 1977, in order to strengthen its constitutional base, that the Union adopted the ‘Declaration of Principle’, the wording of which had been in use by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland since 1938.¹ As for our Union therefore, it was as recently as 1977 that the three clauses which mention specifically the Person of Christ, the sovereign freedom of each local church under the Word, that nature of believer’s baptism and the central importance of evangelism,[that they] became a conscious part of our witness, and the question that I will pose is: what are we to make of them? Are they sufficient to create a bond that can bind us together?

Were you to compare the Declaration to the Apostles’ Creed for instance, the best known of all the classic catholic symbols, you will see that it has many large gaps and omissions. There’s no mention of believing in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth; no mention of Jesus Christ being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, or his having suffered under Pontius Pilate, of descending into the realm of the dead and ascending into heaven; there’s nothing about the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, and were you to compare it to the 1689 Confession of Faith, you

¹ For the history and background, see Richard L. Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996).

will see how stark the omissions are. For centuries the 1689 Confession was exceedingly well known by our forefathers, between its first translation by David Rees, Hengoed, in 1721, to Joshua Thomas' exquisite rendition in 1791, the many editions produced during the nineteenth century to the most recent Welsh-language version, published by our Historical Society in 1989. This was the version described by Sir Glanmor Williams, Wales's premier social historian and faithful Baptist layman, as:

It possesses an especial significance for our own generation as it sets forth in a clear, succinct and attractive way the main points of the Christian faith as it is held by our denomination even to this day.²

There's no doubt that the Declaration seems very thin in comparison with this splendid confession. Listen to the words of the late Neville Clark, former principal of the Cardiff College and one of the most substantial theologians to serve the British Baptist churches during the last century. He mentioned 'the odd selectiveness and strange silences' that characterize the document, and its many omissions, 'hardly a conventional model of credal comprehensiveness ... Any half skilled defender of doctrinal orthodoxies could drive a coach and horses through it with one hand tied behind the back'³ Is *this* sufficient as a means to bind us together as 21st century Baptists in Wales? What I will seek to do in the remainder of this address is to suggest that indeed it is, and that it contains the right level of clarity of purpose and freedom of expression that befits the task to which we have been called in the context of an increasingly secularized Wales.

2. The Lord who binds us together

See what comes first: baptism? No! Evangelism and witness? No! What comes first, constantly and emphatically, is the Lord Jesus Christ:

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer his laws.

Who is this Jesus? The one who is our Lord and Saviour, yes, *our* Lord and Saviour. He is not a prophet, a religious genius, a good man, the most excellent example of what it means to be human, but instead, 'God manifest in the flesh'. Down the centuries the Christian Church has

² Glanmor Williams, 'Cyffes Ffydd y Bedyddwyr', *Seren Cymru*, 17 Chwefror 1989.

³ Neville Clark, *Invitation to a Conversation: 10 Belonging and Believing* (Cardiff: South Wales Baptist College, 1997), p. 11.

proclaimed that in Christ we come face to face with *God* not in a derivative sense but absolutely. He is the one ‘appointed heir of all things, through whom the worlds were created’, as the author to the Hebrews states, ‘He is the refection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (Heb. 1:2-3); he is the one in whom ‘all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell’ as Paul wrote to the Colossians (Col. 1:9), and again: ‘For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Col. 2:9). In him, as John’s Gospel tells us, ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only son, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14), or according to Thomas, following the resurrection, he is ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20:28). Not for nothing has the Church deemed Christ to be divine.

This deity in no way compromises Jesus’ full humanity, his mercy, his tenderness, his saving ministry among the people of Galilee when he announced the coming of the kingdom, and he went about doing good; he is, in fact, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. In the words of the hymnist Ann Griffiths:

True man, in all thy weakness, He truly feels for thee;
True God, o’er world, flesh, Satan, He reigns victoriously.

And it is He, the God-man, the incarnate Christ, who binds us together as Baptists in Wales.

How can we find an authoritative rule in our spiritual lives? Not, in fact, in a book, in the letter of Scripture as such, but in a Person, the Person that the Bible witnesses to in its unique and infallible way, the Old Testament prophets looking forward to Christ’s coming and the New Testament apostles witnessing to his arrival, his works, his sinless perfection, his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection. ‘The Bible’, in Luther’s words, ‘is the cradle in which the Lord Jesus has been laid’, and it is he who, according to the Declaration, has ‘sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures’.

Then the Declaration moves on to mention the church: ‘... and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer his laws’. For Baptists, the church means the local church, the fellowship of believers, brothers and sisters in Christ who gather together Sunday by Sunday to listen to the Word of God and break bread at the Lord’s Table. And that church is a free church! No-one can dictate to it whether it be a bishop, an association and certainly not the Union’s Council! But this freedom is not licence, but freedom under the Word, which is Jesus Christ himself, and then there’s a reference to the Holy Spirit, ‘... that each church has liberty, *under the guidance of the Holy Spirit*, to interpret and administer his laws’. The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal, opaque, ethereal influence, but the third Person of the Holy Trinity, proceeding from the Father, witnessing to the Son and active

within us guiding us, sanctifying us, and sealing God's saving love in our hearts. In doctrinal terms, the Declaration is not only Christological but Trinitarian as well.

Having been a minister in this denomination for forty years, I well know that there is a wide range of different perspectives and sometimes, a dizzy variety of conflicting opinions within our churches, and for myself I'm quite comfortable with that. I wouldn't want to belong to a denomination where everyone was expected to toe a specific line with no opportunity for honest and conscientious disagreement. And the Declaration allows us this freedom. Some of these differences reflect the moral complexities with which we all have to contend, sensitively, in 21st century Wales, but as long as they are the result of thoughtful, measured and balanced consideration following the guidance of the Spirit, they should not threaten our unity in Christ. It is thus that we can ensure what the Letter to the Ephesians calls 'the unity of Spirit in the bonds of peace', and exalt the Lord who binds us together as one.

3. The baptism that binds us together

Having begun with Christ and the freedom which each church has, in the Spirit, to interpret and administer his laws, it is only now that the Declaration turns to what many regard as the essential characteristic of our denomination's witness, namely the fact of baptism:

That Christian baptism is the immersion in water into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scripture; was buried, and rose again the third day'.

Why, one asks, did the framers of the Declaration place this clause here and not at the beginning? Was this a mistake or oversight on their part? I would like to think that it was wholly intentional, reflecting the very dynamic of the gospel. It is Christ himself who comes first, and only then our believing response to him, a response which is informed by our having been brought up in the fellowship of the church. The one who has expressed this best, in my opinion, is Neville Clark, late of the Cardiff Baptist College:

Each Christian community was committed to look steadily at the incarnate Christ carried by scripture, bow to his unchallengeable authority to determine its faith, and practice liberty of discernment in the Lord.

And the way into the life of this community, wherever it is, is through baptism:

It was by taking the baptismal road that you were directed face to face with Trinitarian belief.⁴

As I mentioned at the beginning, that callow youth of fifteen years in Calfaria, Morriston, in the mid-1960s, knew virtually nothing of this! If I had a theology at all – and it's a big 'if'! – it was the theology of the Sunday School and its choruses and hymns:

Live like Jesus, follow Jesus, is the cry of my weak heart,
Say like Jesus, do like Jesus, is the way I wish to start

This being a rough translation of a jaunty hymn that we used to sing heartily in the children's service! It was only afterwards as understanding dawned, as faith was strengthened, as repentance deepened, invariably in the company of those fellow-Christians who became my companions on the way, that I came to appreciate the meaning of the profession I had made before God and the congregation in the baptismal water years earlier. It was then that I came, slowly but surely, to comprehend the rich trinitarian fare and deep sacramental truth that New Testament baptism contained:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6: 3-4)

And again:

For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor. 12: 13a, 27).

Baptism was a single step on the way, an essential step, certainly, an irrevocable step without doubt, by no means the final step in the Christian life. And this is the baptism that binds us together.

4. The mission that binds us together

It is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.

In a way I am hardly the one to tell others that they need to evangelize. I came to realize years ago that if I had any gift at all, it was to teach and perhaps to preach and to provide pastoral care, but not to be an active evangelist. Paul's charge to his young colleague Timothy was, however, 'do the work of an evangelist' (2 Tim. 4:5), and if that was true for him it must be

⁴ Clark, *Invitation to a Conversation: 10 Belonging and Believing*, p. 12.

true for the rest of us. Perhaps the wording of the Declaration reflects the style of an earlier generation which strikes us as being over-individualistic: ‘bearing personal witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and taking part in the evangelization of the world’, but surely the root meaning is as relevant to our secularized, pluralistic, post-Christian Wales as it has ever been. And remember the dynamic of the gospel that the Declaration reflects: it is through the baptismal door that we come to the living Christ in the fellowship of his people, and having looked towards him and been captivated by him we cannot but share with the world what we have experienced. In the words of a more contemporary Baptist voice:

By Christ, in the Spirit, we come to the Father. We are baptized into the life of the triune God and live to share God’s mission in the world.⁵

We are summoned, therefore, to share God’s mission in the world.

But what actually does that entail in our contemporary Wales? As we leave this conference and return to our home communities, the towns and villages of the eastern valleys, the northern counties or here in west Wales, the cities and suburbs of the new Wales, our task, surely, is to persuade people. ‘Therefore’ in the words of the Apostle Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, ‘knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others’ (2 Cor. 5: 11). Persuade them of what? Of the fact that God, in his unbounded love has come among us in Jesus Christ, his Son, not to judge us, not to condemn us, not to find fault with us, but to embrace us, to raise us up, and offer us, and everyone else, life in all its fulness: ‘For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that as one has died for all; therefore, all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them all’ (2 Cor. 5: 14-15). This, surely, is the way that we can play our part in evangelizing the world, and this too is the essence of the mission that binds us as Baptists in Wales, together.

So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:17-21).

⁵ Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, p. 25.

The Lord that binds us together; the baptism that binds us together; the mission that binds us together. May the Lord give us grace that we remain faithful to the heavenly vision.
AMEN

Densil Morgan, June 2022