Ways Of Belonging

The Baptist way of being a church in the light of current sociological and cultural trends

Summary – Because Baptists practise a congregational model of the church it is important that they have a clear understanding of what it means to belong to a particular church. The Baptist doctrine of the church, understood as a voluntary covenanting together, shapes not only questions relating to membership but also the church's ministry and mission, as well as their understanding of salvation. This covenant approach has been applied through Baptist history with varying degrees of consistency, but each successive attempt has brought new insights. Today a new way of applying established principles needs to be found. Understanding today's post-modern culture, particularly in its core value of choice and its changing attitudes to commitment, is a necessary step toward a new theology of belonging.

Covenant is reaffirmed not only as a Biblical and historic approach to a theology of belonging but also appropriate in a post-modern society. Covenant is both relevant and yet counter-cultural; it has both points of contact that make it accessible to present day society as well as challenging accepted norms that run counter to the Christian Gospel. Covenant is well expressed through the symbols of Baptism and Communion, but it is not risk free, and calls for integrity. In particular it is to be distinguished from current ideas of contract.

The purpose of theology is to inform praxis. A theology of belonging based on covenant leads to an open church that is centred around Christ, emphasising passion, service, inclusiveness, and celebration. Belonging to an open church is for all, but covenanting is for those who wish to commit themselves 'to the Lord and one another'. Belonging leads to privilege and responsibility, chief among which is the continuing mission of the church. These develop as the individual journeys deeper into covenant commitment with Christ and with one another.

1 Introduction

Dear Editor - In attending church, I ask myself who made all the rules of the church?

Whatever faith you belong to, there are different rules to adhere to, that are recognised by some, but not others, especially baptism rules.

As a baby, I was baptised, then at 14, I was confirmed. This act, I considered, prepared me for entry into church life. I am aware that in the Baptist Church, one has to be fully immersed in water as an adult in order to become a Baptist, but surely when we are encouraged to lead united services between all

> Christian faiths, we should recognise and respect each others way of praising God?
>
> I have recently moved away from my previous church and there I was a full member, but in my new church, my husband and I are only associate members with limited voting powers. Why the difference in rules?
>
> Surely when attendance numbers are dwindling in churches weekly, we should be encouraged and not ostracised because of the baptism issue.
>
> C Cathie, Wollaston, West Midlands
>
> 'Letters to the Editor' *Baptist Times*, 16 January 2003

1.1 Belonging to today's church

This letter raises a number of issues, but at the heart of the matter is the question of belonging. Who belongs in a particular church, and how does one move from not-belonging to belonging (and, perhaps, back to not-belonging)? The writer of the above letter is not alone in expressing some confusion in this matter. In recent years a number of popular books have appeared telling of the struggles people have had with the church. Philip Yancy's *Soul Survivor* and Simon Jones' *Struggling To Belong* are two recent ones, but as far back as 1978, David Watson opened his book, *I Believe In The Church*, with the words, 'JESUS – YES! CHURCH – NO!' (capitals his). Jones, himself a Baptist minister, states what many have heard, '(Many people) have never seen the point of joining a church. "After all," they say, "I've got my Bible…; I can pray; I can watch services on TV… Why go to church?"' (Jones, S. 1998, 15) That this attitude is widespread is borne out by the 2001 census, which stated that 71.7% of the population of England and Wales claimed to be Christian[1]. Yet recent surveys carried out by Christian Education and Research, the Bible Society and the Evangelical Alliance suggest that a little over 7% of the population actually attend church other than at Christmas or Easter, or on special occasions.

The issue of believing and belonging is of particular interest to those who seek to belong to a Baptist church. At the heart of the Baptist concept of the church is the idea of the 'gathered community'. Confusion sometimes arises because, contrary to what the name may suggest, it is not baptism that differentiates Baptists from other denominations. Many Christian groups practise what is often (and mistakenly) referred to adult baptism. Baptist distinctiveness arises from a combination of elements[2], but principle among these is their congregational approach to church life.

The idea of the church as the gathered people of God has been central to Baptist doctrine since their beginnings in the seventeenth century. Each individual in a fellowship[3] has a part to play in the life of the community, in its ministry and mission. Each is committed to that ministry and mission because each is personally committed to God and to the others in the same fellowship. This commitment is symbolised by the initial act of baptism and maintained through regularly sharing together at the Lord's Table.

This approach to church life has an important impact on Baptists in the light of current attitudes to the church and church attendance. In the last ten years, while attendance at Baptist churches has shown a marginal growth of about 2%, membership in its narrower, formal, sense has fallen by almost 16%.[4] This means that under the structures common in most Baptist churches today the responsibility for the life of the church is being concentrated into smaller and smaller groups. This is not a new problem. In mid-Victorian Britain it has been estimated that only 20% of attenders were members. Baptists must continue to ask themselves how they can remain true to their doctrinal distinctiveness and yet embrace ever increasing numbers of people who do not wish to become members?

1.2 Method

In an attempt to understand the current situation it will be necessary to review some old ground. Firstly it is important to have a clear understanding of what Baptists mean when they talk about belonging to the. Note that this is a two part question. It is not enough to grasp what Baptists mean by church without reference to those who seek to belong to that group. This has always been important for Baptists, who have consistently stressed both the personal and corporate aspects of believing and belonging.

Over the centuries Baptists have faced a number of situations that have caused them to re-think and re-apply their basic principles and yet remain true to those principles. So, secondly, it will be necessary to consider the history of the Baptist concept of the church. The purpose of this is not to judge past generations of Baptists, but rather to see how they responded to the changing world around them.

This in turn will lead to the third major consideration, that of the situation facing the church today. Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a highly complex society and it will be necessary to make some generalisations. These generalisations will be qualified wherever possible, but even with this caveat there is a bewildering variety of social structures and situations to consider.

The fourth step in this journey will be to draw together the three preceding sections and tentatively construct a theology of belonging. In particular, an attempt will be made to gain a clear understanding of what has been called the open church, and to ask if this has any relevance to the questions facing Baptists today. It will also consider some specific issues of church life, such as leadership, post-denominationalism and the practice of associating, that is, the voluntary linking of autonomous fellowships.

Finally, it may be possible to gain a glimpse of things to come. A fellowship's theology, that is, what it believes about its basis, structure and role, will affect the way it acts. Having considered how doctrine, history and analysis of the contemporary situation combine to influence theology, it will in turn be possible to consider how that theology might effect praxis, particularly in the area of membership, ministry and mission.

2 The Baptist doctrine of the church

Baptists do not have a tradition of creedal statements of faith. Generally, Baptists have been wary of such statements, holding, as Brian Haymes says, that 'Baptists… have a vocation to a theology that is always being renewed.' (Haymes 2000, 3) In times past individual Baptist fellowships or associations have produced "Confessions of Faith" but these were intended for the use of a particular congregation or congregations, at a particular time, and were not applied in a wider sphere, except as models. This reluctance towards creeds and confessions grows mainly out of the belief that each fellowship has the liberty, under the power and authority of the Spirit, to discover, interpret and administer the mind of Christ in that particular place and time.

However, this freedom to discern the mind of Christ does not mean that successive generations of Baptist have been able to make it up as they go along. In the first place, Baptists have always emphasised a personal commitment to Christ and to the other members of any fellowship. Baptists would see their commitment not to a creed or statement of faith, but rather to a person.

Secondly, by forming Associations and Unions each fellowship submits to the safeguard of mutual accountability. The basis of the practice of associating has been a series of declarations of principle. The latest of these declarations was adopted by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1947 and still forms the basis on which local fellowships gather together as a union. It states:

> 1. That the Lord 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.
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> 2. That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; 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 evangelisation of the world.

This broad outline, which grows out of a Biblical understanding of a believers' church[5], provides guidance and consistency without being prescriptive. It sets out in general terms what it means to be a Baptist fellowship.

There is, however, a negative aspect to this reluctance to commit to confessions similar to those espoused by earlier Baptists. Alastair Campbell suggests that in recent times, at least, fear of division and fraction may be partly behind the lack of any detailed creed or confession. He illustrates this by referring to the current Declaration of Principle, suggesting that:

> 1. By its brevity it shows every sign of being a compromise document designed to enable a measure of working together by taking theological debate off the agenda…
> 2. It fails to address many of the issues of our time including most contemporary matters of theological and biblical interpretation.
> 3. In consequence it rarely features in Baptist discussions…
>
> (Campbell 1987, 37)

While these points need to be borne in mind, they do not negate the Declaration, enabling, as it does, those who would be divided by a more detailed statement to work together.

2.1 A broad canvas

When considering Baptist ecclesiology, one might use the allegory of a painting. Specific details may be important but an overall impression will be gained by initially taking in the whole picture. On approaching this picture the first thing of note is the frame. Everything within this picture of the church is held together by the authority of Christ. This lordship has always been at the centre of Baptist thinking, and is a distinguishing feature of the radical reformation. This fundamental consideration finds reflections in the picture of the church, itself made up of a number of broad brush strokes.

The first of these brush strokes is that the Church is wider than the Baptist denomination. This needs to be said as a reminder to Christians that all are on a journey together. No one group holds the special position of being right while others are wrong. The only thing the declaration requires is openness to the Spirit and commitment to the Gospel. It is the responsibility of each fellowship to apply that Gospel, under the

lordship of Christ, by the leading of the Holy Spirit and in the light of Scripture, to its own situation.

The second broad brush stroke is that the Church only becomes significant as it expresses itself in local fellowships. The concept of the world-wide church is meaningless without local groups of Christians putting the Gospel into action in their own situations. In this way local fellowships *are* the church. Paul refers to individual local groups of Christians as 'the church' (see, for example 1 Corinthians 11:18 and 14:23). In the same way, he refers to the gathered fellowship in Ephesus as, 'the church of God, which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20:28), a term which, when later writing to the same people, he applies to the whole Church (Ephesians 1:22).

The third stroke is that the basis of belonging to the church is a personal commitment to Christ. This commitment is initially indicated through Believers' Baptism and is maintained through the Lord's Supper. Being a member (whatever form that membership may take) is not an accident of birth or based on one's address. Even though a fellowship worships and serves as a community, the individual's experience and commitment are primary, not only as a rite of passage into the church but also as a means of witness to those outside.

A fourth brush-stroke concerns the purpose of the church. This life, says a Baptist Union statement on the doctrine of the church, dated 1948, 'centres in worship, in the preaching of the Word, the observance of the two sacraments of Believer's Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in growth in fellowship and in witness and service to the world outside.' (Hayden 1980, 7) The statement goes on to say,

> The worship, preaching, sacramental observances, fellowship and witness are all congregational acts of the whole church in which each member shares responsibility, for all are held to be of equal standing in Christ, though there is a diversity of gifts and a difference of functions. (Hayden 1980, 7)

This gives a fifth brush-stroke, and the one that has proved the most contentious over the years. Baptists hold to the position often referred to as the priesthood of all believers, that is that all members of the Christian community are competent (though not necessarily gifted or called) to serve in any capacity within the fellowship or wider church. Some of the implications of this stance will be dealt with in more detail below.

The sixth and final broad stroke in the Baptist idea of the church goes beyond the local fellowship and is concerned with relationships between fellowships. The 1677 Confession of Faith says,

> As each church and all the members of it are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ in all places; and upon occasions to further it… so the churches… ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love and mutual edification.

Commenting on this plea, the Baptist Union statement on the doctrine of the Church says, 'a local church lacks one of the marks of a truly Christian community if it does not seek fellowship with other Baptist churches.' (Hayden 1980, 8) In the light of the 1677 Confession it might be proposed that the word Baptist be omitted from any revision of this statement.

This broad understanding of what it means to be a local church has served Baptists well. It has allowed fellowships to respond to a variety of situations. It is full of risks, depending as it does on small groups maintaining a high degree of integrity in the face of sometimes overwhelming pressures from both without and within the church, and it is in this context that the practice of "associating together" grew. Although autonomous, Baptists have generally considered themselves to be interdependent, rather than independent. From their earliest days, Baptist fellowships have established links with similar fellowships. The practice of associating has helped maintain continuity of both belief and practice by establishing a loose and voluntary form of mutual accountability.

2.2 Walking together – the Baptist way of being a church

Belonging has always been a part of Baptist theology and tradition. Quoting the founding documents of an early Baptist church in Plymouth, Massachusetts, from about 1620, William Bradford writes that they:

> joyned themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospell, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. (1912, 20-22)

This joining together was an acknowledgement that each individual's experience of faith was also a part of a corporate experience. Each person is called not only into relationship with God but also with each other. Fellowships exist where a number of

individuals are gathered together in response to God's call on their lives. Baptists see themselves as gathered communities not only because they chose to meet in a particular place but because they believe God has called them together.

An important aspect of walking together is also contained in the Plymouth statement. There was a commitment to walk in God's ways, "made known, or to be made known". These words recognise that, as the hymn puts it: 'The Lord has yet more light and truth/to break forth from his word' (George Rawson, No 254 in *Baptist Hymn Book* London: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1962). There is an obligation on each successive generation to look again at how and where God is leading them, and to continue the never ending process of re-contextualisation.

These elements: of being a community gathered together by God, of walking together and of continually attempting to re-discover the meaning and implications of the Gospel within the framework of the Bible and in the light of the Cross, have had a deep effect on the way Baptists see themselves as a church. Christopher Ellis puts it this way:

> Fundamental to any Baptist teaching is a view of the church as the fellowship of believers. This Separatist emphasis developed from their reading of the New Testament account of the beginnings of the church and its teaching about the nature and purpose of the people of God. From this belief flows the ordering of local churches with membership and church meetings, the Reformation emphasis on faith, and the evangelical emphasis on 'experimental religion'. (1996, 28)

To this last sentence Ellis adds that this view of the church has a reciprocal effect on the theology and practice of the ordinances of Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This will be considered in more detail below.

2.3 Covenanting together

In the founding statement of the Plymouth church one phrase points to the nature of their joining and walking together. It says that they 'joyned themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate'. This concept of covenant was, 'an idea that gripped the minds and imaginations of our predecessors.' (Fiddes 1999, 74) It was fundamental to almost every aspect of theology and church practice. 'Covenant is about relationship and trust, about "walking together", which is in some mysterious way a part of the very journey of salvation.' (Fiddes 1999, 73) Not only did it express the basis of the

individual's salvation and relationship with God, it also described the relationship between men and women who were not only in a covenant relationship with God but also with one another. It thus gave a sense of identity to both the individual believer and the fellowship, not only in that time and place but also within the universal Church.

This sense of belonging and identity expressed itself in a variety of ways. Because it offered the possibility of assurance, renewal, continuity and power it aroused enthusiasm for spiritual, political and social action. (see Fiddes 1999, 74) On the other hand, ideas of covenant could, and in fact did, lead to some fellowships becoming closed, inward looking ghettos. The tension between these two facets of covenant has been felt throughout Baptist history.

2.3.1 The basis of covenant

There has long been an interest in the Biblical idea of Covenant, particularly among Old Testament scholars.[6] The various covenants of the Bible have shaped ideas regarding relationships within the Church and although a number of covenants are described in the Bible, certain covenants raise key issues. Central to these is the Covenant of Grace, God's eternal, unbreakable, unilateral covenant that forms the basis of all other covenant relationships. This covenant is particularly remembered and celebrated at the Lord's Supper. Out of this eternal covenant, made between God and the community of faith, represented in the Old Testament by Israel, all other covenants issue. These may be more general, as the Noahic Covenant made with all Creation (Genesis 9:1-17) or more specific, as the covenant made with Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-13). They may be conditional, as at Sinai (Exodus 19:3-6), or unconditional, as the new Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31ff).

The complexity of Israel's experience of covenant led Walter Brueggemann to comment:

> As a crucial theological datum in Israel that cannot be reduced to a single uniform formulation, the covenant is as rich and plural as is any lively relationship. It still lives as Israel, in its deep trust, adjudicated YHWH's harsh demands and deep commitments. The covenant poses for Israel the difficult issue of fidelity from God and toward God. Israel knows that fidelity on God's part is freely given, but is never cheap and never mocked. (2002, 39)

This Old Testament emphasis is continued into the New. Brueggemann continues:

> In the Christian tradition, Jesus is the bearer of the new covenant (Heb. 8:8-13) that is made palpable in the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:25). In Matthew 26:26-29, moreover, Jesus himself speaks the covenant formula concerning his significance for his disciples. As a liturgical datum, the covenant subsequently became, through the tradition of John Calvin, a defining theological principle and subsequently a grounding for a theory of the democratic ordering of public power. (2002, 39)

This complex background was the foundation for the Covenant theology of the early Puritans which, through the Separatists and early Baptists, such as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, became an integral part of Baptist understanding of the Church.

The language of "walking together", a dynamic image, is often used by early Baptists. Even when no explicit reference is made to a covenant, the Baptist doctrine of the church reflects this idea of relationship. Today, with a renewed interest in covenant as a basis for church life (as seen in, for example, in the Baptist Union of Great Britain's publication, *Covenant 21* Didcot: BUGB, 2001) there has been a re-emphasis on relationship and journeying together.

2.3.2 The nature of covenanting

'To be a member of a Baptist church is to be in a relationship with God and with other members; that is to say, it is to be in covenant.' So says Stephen Finamore commenting on the nature of Baptist church life. (Finamore 2002, 75) An important aspect of this covenant relationship is that it is both two-dimensional and bi-directional. It is two-dimensional because it has both a vertical component – between God and his people, both individually and gathered, and a horizontal component – between those joined together in fellowship and who have thereby entered into a covenant with one another. It is bi-directional because, as with all sound relationships, it is reciprocal. All parties have duties, responsibilities and privileges under the covenant.

Within a fellowship, individuals pledge fidelity and openness to one another. Being bound to the same covenant, they agree to walk together, seeking to help and encourage one another in their shared journey. As one Baptist wrote in her diary in April 1734:

> I find that the concerns of others go very near my own soul such as I hope have an interest in Christ when I know their temptations their afflictions or their consolations. I seem to bear an equal share in either [and] how can it be otherwise when I look upon them together with myself as part of the purchase of

Christ'
(quoted in Smith 1999, 182)

2.3.3 Covenant and salvation

Covenant theology also has implications for the Baptist doctrine of the church in relationship to salvation. Paul Fiddes, tracing the history of this relationship says, 'Embedded in a covenant theology is… a theology of renewal of salvation.' (1999, 66) The significance of this relationship is perhaps best seen in what may be called ongoing "convertedness". Being in a covenant with God and with fellow Christians keeps that relationship in the foreground. It recognises that it is not enough to simply look back and say that before this particular day one was outside of God's saving grace and afterwards one is within it. Covenant carries within it the sense of ongoing renewal, itself a significant Old Testament motif.

The continuous demands of living the covenant life are a constant reminder of the individual's personal commitment to and ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. Such an interpretation may be criticised on the basis that it appears to make salvation conditional on adherence to a work or duty performed by the individual, but this need not be so if commitment to the covenant relationship is seen as a response to saving grace, and not a precondition.

Furthermore, the relationship between covenant theology and salvation has a influenced on the community as a whole. As Karen Smith says, 'While personal faith is essential, union with Christ was not simply an individual experience, but a corporate one which united believers as members of the body of Christ – the Church.' (1999, 167) Such an understanding encourages the members of a fellowship to "give themselves to the Lord and to one another" and to walking together. To be a Christian is to be in a community. A covenant understanding of salvation generally disallows the idea of a lone Christian[7].

2.4 The church as a voluntary society

Covenant is not seen as imposed by God on people. It is seen as a mutual agreement, voluntarily entered into. God's covenant with his people is a gracious one. That is, God freely gives himself to his people. In response, God's people, as individuals and as the gathered community, seek to follow God's ways, fulfilling his requirements and

receiving his blessings. Out of this sense of being the gathered people of God, each person voluntarily agrees to walk with others, seeking out God's ways in all the different circumstances of their journey together. This conviction that the church is a voluntary society is a natural result of the radical reformation's emphasis on religious freedom. John Locke, writing in *Letter of Toleration* (1689) said that:

> [A Church] is a free and voluntary Society… no Man is bound by nature to any particular Church or Sect, but he joins himself voluntarily to that Society in which he believes he has found that Profession and Worship which is truly acceptable to God. (quoted in Fiddes 1999, 67)

This voluntarism is a characteristic of Baptist (and other free church) life, but the expression needs to be used with care. From a covenant theology perspective, it may be argued that the Church most certainly is not a voluntary society. It is sometimes held that because of the fallen nature of mankind there is a spiritual inability to chose God. People are gathered into the covenant community by the compelling grace of God, who effectively calls and enables a response. In response to this Nigel Wright says:

> However, because this is God's work and God's work alone it cannot be prescribed or compelled by powers political or ecclesiastical. A commitment to religious liberty has as its corollary the belief that people and communities should be allowed space within which they may make their own responses, choices and decisions. (2002, 58)

Such a commitment to freedom recognises that there can be no compulsion on the part of church (or civil) organisations to join a particular church or believe a certain set of doctrines. It also emphasises the part of the individual in the life of the church. While covenant draws attention to the corporate nature of the one body, voluntarism acknowledges that the one body is made of several parts. It is for this reason that early Baptists were in the vanguard of those who struggled for religious liberty and toleration for all, not just for themselves. It was Thomas Helwys, an early Baptist, addressing James I in 1612 who wrote, 'Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure… men's religion is betwixt God and themselves.'

2.5 The relationship between believing and belonging

Traditionally, Baptists have seen the church as the community of those who have covenanted together, that is, those who have committed themselves to Christ and to each other. Membership of a particular fellowship was marked by a processes of formal

acceptance, usually beginning with conversion and baptism and culminating in receiving "the right hand of fellowship" as the community gathers around the Lord's table[8]. Other routes, such as transfer of membership from one fellowship to another, also exist, but even though there are variations in practice, entry into membership still follows this common pattern.

At first glance it may seem obvious who is in and who is out, but any church is a complex society and will include people at many different stages of faith (and no faith). No simple way of categorising such a complex set of relationships exists but the following broad groups may be observed:

- Believing and belonging
- Belonging but not yet believing
- Belonging but no longer believing
- Believing and belonging intermittently

To these may be added the following groups outside of the church

- Believing but not yet belonging
- Believing but no longer belonging
- Neither belonging nor believing

(*cf* Wright 2002, 77-8)

These present a new challenge to Baptist churches, for it is necessary to consider the relationship between believing, behaving and belonging. In the past Baptist have been able to respond (though not always quickly) to changing circumstances. Today, perhaps the major challenge for Baptist churches has to do with this very question.

3 Believing and belonging: how we got from there to here.

Baptists trace the beginnings of their story, through the Separatist and Anabaptist movements, back to the radical reformation. Unlike those churches that arose from the Magisterial Reformation (*eg* Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwinglians) the Separatists had no figurehead leaders; there is no date, no place, no person, to whom Baptists can look with complete confidence as the beginning or founder of the movement.

Although these historical beginnings go back little more than four centuries, they arose from an understanding of Scripture. It was through their reading of the New Testament, in particular, that they came to see the church as a gathered community of believers. This appreciation led to a variety of interpretations. Early Baptists were divided along a number of lines. However, these differences did not alter their basic understanding of what it meant to be a church.

Over the years these groups coalesced until today there are only two main branches in England and Wales, those represented by the major unions[9], drawn from most of the older groups, and a smaller grouping of Particular Baptists[10]. There are also a number of independent churches that represent a wide spectrum of Baptist beliefs and practices. These divisions has not always been driven by Biblical understanding. As Barrie White points out:

> Since the 17th century, the Baptists have become gradually less concerned about their New Testament roots. I do not mean that they have *said* less but that they have been *shaped* less and less by scripture and more by the mood of the times in which they have lived. (1987, 27)

3.1 The problem with history – and Baptists!

These loosely defined beginnings have made it difficult not only to trace the origins of Baptists, but also to follow the subsequent history of the Baptist movement. The history of Baptists is best expressed in the history of individuals and specific congregations. Particularly in earlier times, with strong local traditions and poor communications between towns and regions, Baptists developed local models to suit local circumstances. This ability to meet local needs becomes more marked as Baptists began to spread across the world. Today there is a wide variety of Baptist life throughout the world, yet

still a Baptist distinctiveness[11] that enables bodies like the World Baptist Alliance and the European Baptist Federation to encompass diverse groups.

Because a detailed examination of even the limited question of belonging is beyond the scope of this paper it is necessary to restrict comments to two examples only. The first of these is West Wales between the years 1668 and 1689, and the second is London between 1858 and 1901.

3.2 Restoration Wales

The first example concerns a group of people meeting in a wide area on the borders of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire, led by William Jones (died *c.* 1700). It covers the period from the start of his ministry in 1668 to the beginning of the reign of William and Mary and the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689.

3.2.1 Historical setting

The world of the second half of the seventeenth century was very different from our own. Britain had just emerged from a devastating civil war which had seen the old order swept away. Not only had the king been executed and the House of Lords abolished, but the very social structures of the early Stuarts and Tudors had suffered irreversible damage. In a time of such upheaval those with ambition and drive, whatever their social background and class, could rise to positions of power and wealth. Even with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the old ways did not return, try as Charles II might to re-establish them. For Roman Catholics and Dissenters, including Baptists, it was also a time of persecution.

When Charles II was restored the state (Anglican) church also returned to power and became immediately embroiled in a power struggle with the catholic king. A series of laws, known collectively as the Clarendon Code (1661-65), revived some old Tudor laws, and enacted new ones, aimed at curbing both the activities of the catholic church in Wales and England and ridding the Anglican church of Nonconformist, principally Presbyterian, influence. However, these laws were indiscriminate and impacted on all Dissenters with equal vigour. The Corporation Act (1661) required all members of municipal bodies to swear an oath of allegiance and to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper according to the Anglican rite. The Act of Uniformity (1662) stated that

all clergymen conform to the doctrines and order of the Book of Common Prayer. The Conventricle Act (1664) mitigated the penalties of an Elizabethan law punishing all those attending a non-Anglican service[12] though its restrictions were maintained. Finally, the Five Mile Act (1665) prevented displaced clergy from coming within five miles of their old beneficiaries. The importance and impact of the Clarendon Code are summed up by George Clark:

> The decisions of the king and parliament on these points were of the utmost importance in determining some of the main lines not only of ecclesiastical policy but social and political life for more than two hundred and fifty years to come. (1956, 19)

Although not aimed specifically at Baptists, these laws bit hard into Baptist life, ministry and witness. Across the land these laws were unevenly and often unjustly[13] applied and many Baptists were stripped of property, livelihood, freedom and occasionally life.

In 1667 Lord Clarendon fell from power, and under the pretext of giving relief to Dissenters the king, after a protracted argument with Parliament, issued a Declaration of Indulgence (1672) suspending all penal laws relating to ecclesiastical matters. But the respite for Baptists was short lived. Believing that the king was in fact assisting Catholics, Parliament passed the Test Act (1673) the following year. This required anyone who received payment from the government to swear an oath of allegiance and to receive Communion by the Anglican rite on penalty of loss of job. It also required anyone teaching in or attending university to do the same. Although it was no longer illegal to be a Baptist it was now impossible for Baptists, among others, to hold any position of power or influence. Baptist had been effectively sidelined from public life. These laws remained in force throughout Charles II's reign and that of his catholic brother, James II (1685-89). In 1689 Mary, the protestant daughter of James, and her husband William were invited to take the throne. One of the earliest laws to be passed in their reign was the Toleration Act (1689). Much of the Clarendon Code was repealed or mitigated so that it no longer applied to Dissenters (though Catholics were still persecuted) and compulsory attendance at Anglican services was abolished.

In this world of upheaval, change and persecution, those who were drawn to the Baptist way of expressing their faith had a strong sense of fellowship and mutual support. Not only were those who were part of the fellowship instructed in the

Christian life, both theory and practice, but practical help was offered to all those in need. Those who were part of the fellowship were expected to contribute to church life "according to their gifts".

3.2.2 William Jones and Rhydwilym

Shortly after the Restoration William Jones[14], an Independent minister was ejected from his living and then imprisoned in Carmarthen for teaching without a license. While in prison he is said to have met Jenkin Jones (no relative) who introduced him to Baptist principles. Convinced by what he heard, William Jones, on release from prison, was baptised at Olchon, near Abergavenny, in 1666 or 67. He returned to Carmarthenshire and began preaching. In August 1667 he baptised a number of believers who continued to meet together in one another's homes. The following July the number meeting had risen to thirty-one and a church, under Jones' leadership, was founded at Rhydwilym. This fellowship was considered to be a daughter church of Olchon and was supported by them in its early days.

By all accounts, the church at Rhydwilym was a poor church, consisting mainly of farm workers. This may be part of the explanation as to why they were not subject to some of the persecutions experienced by other Baptists. Over the following years they continued to grow until in 1689, at the time of the passing of the Toleration Act they consisted of 131 members drawn from a large part of West Wales. They met in five congregations, each led by a presiding elder, who was assisted by a number of deacons. They were cared for by a group of pastors and teaching elders. The church also consisted of an unspecified number of "hearers", those who attended the church but who were not in full membership. In the early years of William and Mary two of the local congregations grew and were reconstituted as churches in their own right.

The pattern of pastor, elder, deacon and mother-church, daughter-church, in many ways similar to the modern cell-church model, was a local response to the problems faced by the church. Restrictions on the availability of properly trained pastors meant that pastors had to minister to more than one congregation. Poverty would also have limited resources available for small congregations to support pastors, who were usually "part-time" and earned their living through secular work. Practical

restrictions on travel meant that, given the distances involved, one meeting place would not be practical.

All this happened in the face of official opposition which had a significant effect on membership. In a time of persecution, Baptists sought to protect themselves from fifth-columnists by strict membership policies. Given the system of informers who infiltrated various organisations and then turned state witness for a percentage of the fines and distraints, membership was taken very seriously. As in other parts of Wales and England, application for baptism and membership (usually considered to be part of the same process) was a rigorous process in which the applicant had to demonstrate the validity of their conversion, the honesty of their desire to join the fellowship and the integrity of their life.

Under William Jones' leadership Rhydwilym held to the practice of Believers' Baptism, covenanted membership and closed Communion. Leaders were largely chosen from among the members, with a strict hierarchy of office. Deacons were called by God to serve in that office and their call was recognised by their congregation. Within that congregation they had responsibility for the pastoral care and discipline of the members. The congregation was led by an elder whose calling was recognised by the whole fellowship, not just the individual congregation. Similarly, the teaching elders (men gifted in teaching and/or preaching and drawn from their own congregations) were recognised by the fellowship. The minister was ordained and recognised by the wider church, represented through the association. Apart from these, the church also appointed messengers (representatives at meetings of several churches, such as associations), visitors (usually widows who assisted deacons) and lay preachers (sometimes called "ordinary prophets").

The Baptists of Rhydwilym did not attempt to reproduce the New Testament in their churchmanship. They were deeply immersed in the Bible but did not see it as a blueprint for seventeenth century West Wales. Rather, they took the principles of Christian living they read in the Gospels, Acts and letters, together with their understanding of the Old Testament, and developed a church appropriate to their circumstances.

3.3 Victorian London

The second historical example of Baptist ecclesiology is found in the life of John Clifford and his ministry at Praed Street, Paddington, later rebuilt and renamed Westbourne Park Chapel, Bayswater, from the start of his ministry in 1858 to the death of Victoria in 1901.

3.3.1 Historical setting

The early years of Victoria's reign, which began in 1837, were marked by considerable social and economic upheaval. By contrast, mid-Victorian England was relatively quiet. Class conflict was limited and most seemed comfortable with a system that divided society on class lines provided that individuals could move up (and down) the social ladder.

The spirit of the age was captured in a court case in 1867. In his summing up the judge said, 'Everybody knows that the total aggregate happiness of mankind is increased by every man being left to the unbiased, unfettered determination of his own will and judgement as to how he will employ his industry and other means of getting on in the world.' In such a society there seemed little need for strong government. The fragmentation of parties after 1846[15] afforded considerable independence to members of Parliament and small lobbies often determine parliamentary strategies. However, people's real fear seemed to be a powerful executive government. The government's primary task was to administer, not legislate. For the first twenty-five years of Victoria's reign there was little legislation dealing with public issues.

It was during these middle years that "Victorianism" came to represent a cluster of restraining moral attributes – character, duty, earnestness, hard work, respectable behaviour, and thrift. These virtues were embraced by most of society. Yet despite their widespread appeal, all were subjected to contemporary criticism. For example, Dickens frequently made fun of the Victorian smugness and unwillingness to face unpleasant facts and the critics John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold questioned many of the accepted beliefs and prejudices of the age. Even Samuel Smiles, who enthusiastically upheld these virtues, thought that none came naturally to men nor could any of them be taken for granted.

Mid-Victorian prosperity reached its peak in a boom that collapsed in 1873. There followed a troubled period as the national rate of growth fell while that of competitors, particularly Germany, was rising, sometimes spectacularly. This resulted in changes in other areas of life. Some of the new union leaders were confessed socialists who wanted political power to secure their objectives. A number of socialist organisations were founded in the closing decades of the century; the Social Democratic Federation (1884), the Independent Labour Party (1893) and the Fabian Society (1883-84) which included many intellectuals who would play a large part in 20th century labour politics.

For many people questions of faith were as important as economic, social or political ones. Chief among these were doubts about previously accepted biblical interpretation. Discoveries in geology and biology continued to challenge accepted dogma. The best known of these challenges came from Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Notwithstanding this religion itself flourished in Victorian Britain. There was a growing interest in Roman Catholicism while Baptists and other Dissenters had a strong influence over large sections of the middle classes. Sometimes the battles between Anglicans and Dissenters was bitterly contested. A whole network of local voluntary bodies, led either by Anglicans or Dissenters and usually in rivalry, came into existence.

Evangelicals, which included most Baptists, were in many ways the most influential of religious groups. They were suspicious both of ritual and of appeals to any authority other than that of the Bible. Their concern with individual conduct was a force for social conformity rather than for a depth of individual religious experience. However, some Evangelicals were prepared to become involved in social issues and, without loosing their preoccupation for saving souls, their efforts influenced both overseas developments and domestic legislation.

Beyond the influence of the church there were many people who were ignorant of, or indifferent toward, the Christian message, as shown by the 1851 religious census[16]. Although movements like the Salvation Army, founded by William Booth in 1865, attempted to minister to the poor, there were many signs of apathy or even hostility. Among other things, belief in the family was accompanied by a high

incidence of prostitution, and the sale of sensational stories, whether truth or fiction, continually increased. Many Victorians were as eager to read about crime as to read the Bible.

3.3.2 John Clifford and Praed Street Chapel

John Clifford (1836-1923) came from a small town near Nottingham. When he was nineteen he left work in a local factory to study for the Baptist ministry. Three years later he was called as pastor to Praed Street Chapel, Paddington. He remained there until he retired in 1915, a ministry of fifty-seven years!

Clifford's influence was much wider than his own congregation, or even denomination. He was active in politics, was an early member of the Fabian Society and a Companion of Honour. He was twice president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland and the first president of the Baptist World Alliance. His principle concern throughout his life and ministry was two-fold. Firstly, Clifford's religion was Christocentric. "Christ," he is reported to have said, "has been to me the centre of intellectual repose, as well as the guide and inspiration of my life, my Saviour and Master, Leader and Companion, Brother and Lord." (Quoted in Underwood 1947, 228) Secondly, he was committed to personal evangelism.

John Briggs says of him, 'Whereas Nonconformists of an earlier period had been content to enrol small groups of elect Christians, Clifford and his contemporaries aimed at nothing less than taking up the whole world into the body of Christ.' (1994, 23) To this end they saw the church as functional, and not simply relational. The church was to establish God's kingdom both through missionary activity abroad and social endeavour at home. Clifford summed up this attitude when he spoke at the laying of the foundation stone for the new building in Bayswater:

> We are not rearing this edifice merely 'for the public worship of Almighty God' during two or three hours a week; or chiefly for the 'administration' of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper instituted by our King; but mainly, and in the first instance, as a meeting-place, drill-ground and working centre of a community of men 'whose heart the Lord has touched', and who will be better themselves as Christian men and citizens, and do better work in the world by means of their fellowship in the Gospel of Christ. (Quoted in Briggs 1994, 25)

Whereas Rhydwilym had consisted of at least five congregations with a combined membership of 131, Praed Street had to be rebuilt to accommodate the

hundreds, even thousands[17], who attended each Sunday. This raised a serious question for many: was not a chapel with over a thousand seats a denial of basic Baptist principles? This was a tension that was never successfully resolved and there was a steady move away from a covenant basis to church life. There was pressure to meet the needs of a sizable proportion of the population, and the older model could not cope with such vast numbers. One minister of the time commented that while the Church was God's institution, 'congregations are the creatures of circumstances.'

In this situation the role of Believers' Baptism became more significant. With such large congregations it would be easy for the individual to avoid personal commitment. Baptism helped prevented this by presenting a personal Gospel. Briggs points out that, 'The crucial question to be asked of a church's membership was whether its members were a converted people, seeking, however fallibly, to walk in holiness.' (1994, 21) Or, in Clifford's own words, 'the possession of regenerate life is the indispensable condition of admission to the privileges of Church membership.' (Quoted in Briggs 1994, 30)

At the heart of Praed Street was the church meeting. It was here that the members discussed matters of theology, recognised officers and exercised church discipline[18]. Here men and women who earnestly resisted the interference of government in their lives submitted themselves to the mutual judgement of their fellow believers. However, there is evidence to suggest a considerable disparity between membership and attendance[19].

The last half of the nineteenth century was the golden age of preaching. Vast congregations (audiences?) gathered to hear famous speakers. Pastors were often chosen on their ability to speak. The priority given to preaching tended to make worship more passive, with less congregational participation. Only in hymn singing did the congregation still play an active part in worship.

3.4 What next?

These two situations could not be more different from each another, but they both show how communities, gathered together under the same principles, applied their understanding of those principles to their circumstances. There is in each case the tension of Biblical understanding, doctrinal principles and the contemporary situation.

The clash between those representing systematic Puritanism on the one hand and dynamic Evangelicalism on the other showed some of the points of contact, and friction, between these two worlds.

The differences between these two examples reflect more than a changing world. Although many of these changes, particularly in the social, economic and political worlds, were outside their control, they were also differentiated by attitudes within the church. Principle among these was the question of the nature of the church. The strong relational emphasis of the early Baptists, with their stress on experimental religion, is replaced by a increasingly functional approach, concerned more with social justice. Although committed to personal faith and the extension of God's kingdom on earth, Praed Street, like other Baptists and Nonconformists, struggled with the new socialist activism. Briggs writes, this activism, '[was] in danger of being sanctified as the new religion of the Free Churches to such an extent that the high ideals of the gathered church were sometimes put at risk.' (1994, 42)

These two churches are also to be distinguished in their attitudes and approach to church life. For the early Baptists prayer had been the centre of their worship services. Prayer was a corporate act with each member taking an active part. For the Victorians the emphasis had shifted to preaching, a solitary act leading to passive participation. This passivity is seen in the high number of church attenders, but low membership. Without active participation there is little to draw people into a deeper sense of belonging. Church life became the domain of fewer people. Even within the core membership, responsibilities once thought to be the duty of all fell to the minister and deacons alone. It is clear that the function of discipline had changed over the previous two centuries and that much more of this was being undertaken by the Minister and deacons without the members being fully aware of the details. For example, the minute book for Loughwood Baptist Church, Devon, for 7 February 1883, records without further comment, 'Elizabeth Pavey's name was struck out and our prayer is that she may be led to repentance.' (see Briggs 1994, 34)

For all their differences, both churches still had many points in common. Principle among these was the centrality of Christ, both as Lord of the church and as a personal saviour. Both recognised the authority of Scripture, though they approached

this question from very different circumstances. Both held to the practice of Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper as a rite of initiation and continuing fellowship. Both recognised the right of individual fellowships to work out God's purposes for that fellowship. Both believed that the church was God's instrument for changing society. These points of agreement make it possible to speak of a continuity of history which is equally valid today.

4 Believing and belonging in a post-modern culture

The last twenty-five years have seen remarkable changes in British society. Even as late as 1990 an influential commercial research paper on business trends to be expected in the nineties is noticeable for the lack of one key word – the internet. In his final address, President Clinton remarked that when he was first elected there were 300 registered web sites. As he left the White House eight years later there were an estimated 200,000,000! Changes in other areas have been equally remarkable.

This changing context for society has been given a title, post-modernism, but even after more than a decade it is still difficult to define what is meant by this expression, and there is still no agreed term for what is variously called postmodernism, postmodernity or post-modernity. This uncertainty, even confusion, is not surprising given the nature of changes. How is one to define and catalogue something that wants to shake off definitions and absolutes, denies the validity of metanarratives and is not to be contained in the ideas of one person or school of thought?

In particular, the denial of metanarratives means that it is not possible to codify, or predict, a post-modern society. This absence has left a trail of confusion throughout the churches in Britain. When academics and researchers cannot reach a consensus as to the nature and content of a post-modern world how is the ordinary church member supposed to respond? In fact the response has been painfully obvious; across the denominations church membership and attendance are in rapid decline. In the three years between 1992 and 1995 attendance at worship in Methodist churches fell by almost 10%[20], a rate of decline which means that before the middle of this century Methodism will have ceased to exist in Britain. Anglicans report a similar decline of just over 3% in 1994-5,[21] while Roman Catholics report a steady decline in those attending Mass, projecting a halving of the numbers attending between 1988 and 2005.[22] Although the Baptist Union of Great Britain reports a marginal rise in attendance there has been a fall in the membership of Union churches. The picture in Wales is somewhat different. Between 1992 and 2000 BUGB churches in Wales reported a fall in both membership (18.8% or 2.3% per year) and attendance (15.6% or 2% per year)[23]. The Baptist Union of Wales reported a 24.3% (or 3% per year) fall in

membership for the same period[24]. BUW does not keep records of attendance, but personal discussions with Peter Dewi Richards, then General Secretary of the Union, suggests that at present, attendance is falling more steeply than membership.

This scene is as depressing as it is confusing, and much heart-searching has taken place in the past decade among theologians, sociologists and church leaders. There is, however, little agreement about what is to be done in practical terms. In the light of the nature of changes in society, driven as they are, consciously or otherwise, by a post-modern agenda, it is highly unlikely that one analysis and one programme for change and renewal will work across the wide spectrum of today's society.

A sociological approach to the questions relating to membership and belonging might not be able to provide a definitive answer, but it may provide a useful insight into the matter. To this end it will prove informative to reflect on the issue of belonging not only to Baptist churches but also how one joins and belongs to other churches, and to consider secular organisations and structures, particularly voluntary groups.

4.1 Models of church attendance and affiliation

There is no single model of church affiliation. One particular view, generally called congregational, has been outlined above. This model of the church is not restricted to Baptists. Still others will differ to a greater or lesser degree, reflecting their doctrine of the church in general and membership (especially leadership) in particular. These differing models will affect membership, both joining and leaving, and ideas of belonging.

For example, membership of an Anglican church is based on home location. Each parishioner has the right, enshrined in law, to the services of the local church for christenings, marriages and burials, and to vote in elections to the parish council. Membership of these churches in Wales and England is co-terminus with the electoral roll for the same area. Attendance is generally measured by counting those present at Easter. Increased mobility has made this model somewhat problematic. Joining and leaving such churches may involve no more than being there or not being there.

A Presbyterian model, while similar in may ways to Baptist churches in membership structures, differs in its doctrine of the church. Baptists, and other

Congregationalists, see each separate fellowship as a complete (though not perfect) expression of the church, competent to regulate its own affairs under the headship of Christ through the gathered membership. Presbyterians maintain a more centralised view of the church. Louis Berkhof, a leading Presbyterian systematic theologian, states, 'The Reformed system honours the autonomy of the local church, though it always regards this as subject to the limitations that may be put upon it as the result of its association with other churches in one denomination.' (1941, 584) Individual fellowships have a 'right and duty' to unite with other fellowships on a common confessional basis and form a wider organisation for doctrinal, judicial and administrative purposes.

A guide produced for those seeking membership of such churches says that membership is open to all believers. Membership criteria are an understanding of the process, duties and responsibilities of membership and a willingness to be associated with a particular fellowship (Lane 1992, 39f). The guide makes it clear that 'baptism is not an absolute condition of church membership' (33). It also states that it is the duty of members to meet together for worship, to love and serve one another, and to appoint, submit to, support and co-operate with church leaders (57-70). Because of this emphasis on a particular pattern of leadership this system is sometimes referred to as 'representative'.

There are other systems, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), who reject all notion of membership and church government, and Episcopalian, which may be taken to include some of the newer churches, with a strict hierarchical structure. Other newer church congregations and groupings often adopt a modified form of representative government, where the stress is on leadership, while still others adopt a form of congregationalism. Together with the Roman Catholic model, the membership of which is largely based on birth and family connection, these systems represent the most common approaches to membership.

4.2 Belonging in a wider context

The principle issue facing society today may not be one of belonging. The question asked is not, "Where do I belong?" but, "Who am I?"[25] That is, the chief concern is one of identity rather than community. Of course, questioning one's individual identity may

involve wider issues, such as, “Where do I fit in?” but such questions are asked out of a personalised agenda. Some have gone as far as to see this quest for identity as a surrogate for community (*eg* Jackson 2002, 21).

The search for personal identity without reference to community has deep implications. Jackson has pointed out that by making individual identity central one is forced to assume personal responsibility for the future, and so increase the general level of anxiety and uncertainty. He adds that, ‘Asserting identity also serves to increase an awareness of difference and separateness.’ (Jackson 2002, 21). And so ideas of community and belonging are further eroded.

4.2.1 The rise of consumerism and the search for identity

The search for identity within a system that denies metanarratives may be regarded by some as a Sisyphean task. Post-modernism has left one option open, that of self-construction through consuming or, “I shop, therefore I am”. The search for identity no longer calls us to define ourselves by the community (or communities) to which we belong (as in the seventeenth century), nor by our function and what we produce (as in the nineteenth century), but rather by what we consume. David Lyon says, ‘We shape our malleable image by what we buy – our clothing, our kitchens and our cars tell the story of who we are [becoming].’ Zygmunt Bauman adds, ‘The opportunity to “shop around”, to pick and shed one’s “true self”, to be “on the move”, has come to signify freedom.’ (2001, 1) Commenting on this relationship between the individual, freedom and consumerism, and its consequences Walter Brueggemann warns:

> (a) consumerism is the conviction that the unit of social meaning is the detached individual whose self and identity consist in consumption; (b) such unbridled consumption requires a disproportion of wealth and advantage, which must be defended by military means (for example, immigration policy); and (c) this defence of advantage is readily and simply justified by a one-dimensional technological mindset that in principle brackets out of consideration all human questions. (1997, 741)

It is apparent that such consumerism as described by Lyon, Bauman and Brueggemann stands in direct opposition to Christian covenant commitment.

4.2.2 Belonging and not belonging

Recent research carried out by Philip Richter and Leslie Francis into why people leave the church identifies a number of causes (Richter and Francis 1998). Chief among those cited are:

- A lack or loss of faith, or the failure of faith to connect with the rest of life.
- Changes in the individual's understanding on questions of faith and lifestyle not matched by the church.
- A mismatch between the stage of faith of the individual and that of the church as a whole.

These general reasons may manifest themselves in different ways (*eg* dissatisfaction with pastoral care or unease with certain styles of worship) but it is striking that when these reasons are viewed as a whole they reflect the consumerist attitudes prevalent in society as a whole. The fact is that the church did not live up to the individual's expectations and they did not receive what they thought they had the right to expect. Say Richter and Francis, 'if people's expectations of the church are not fulfilled, disillusionment may set in and church leaving may occur. In fact one of the reasons why people leave voluntary organisations in general is because they have become disenchanted.' (1998, 102)

These expectations arise from the core value of consumerism – choice. Choice is the watchword of much of British society today and a cornerstone of political debate and planning. It is central to consumerism at all levels, from house purchase to DIY repairs, from nursery schools to nursing homes. Choice affects people's lives in every respect, including choices regarding relationships. Such choices are usually unilateral; individual preferences made without reference to others. It is not surprising, therefore, that such choice should extend to attitudes toward the church. Not only is one free to choose to attend church or not, but one may also expect to exercise choice as to which church. If a particular church does not match up to expectation then one may exercise one's "consumer rights" and move on or leave altogether. Religion is seen as having no intrinsic rights over any other commodity, and must compete in the market place.

This is not simply a question of commitment. Consumers often show brand loyalty and commitment to a particular product. It has been noted that many who leave

church maintain a declared belief in God. In the wider context, people still commit to both ideas and relationships. Young people, who churches find difficult to retain, can be deeply committed to issues that fire them. Couples who choose not to enter a formal marriage relationship may be as committed to one another, or more so, than those in more traditional relationships. What is true is that the nature of that commitment is changing. As Richter and Francis say:

> Nowadays marriage is increasingly seen in terms of a relationship that promises 'emotional intimacy, mutual affection and sexual fulfilment' Marriage is entered upon and kept going as long as it delivers these goods and the couple will settle for nothing less. (1998, 4)

However, when expectations are not met couples will exercise their right to choose and leave. It has also been noted that as situations change, as, for example, when children grow up, so choices change. That which was once seen as appropriate, and so chosen and committed to, is no longer perceived as relevant.

These, and many other choices, are seen as defining the person, with the possibility of continually redefining ourselves as situations and personal preferences dictate. What is true of chosen brands, products and services is also true of church. A person's perceived right to choose extends to his or her spiritual and religious life. In this scenario there is no basic antipathy to religion, but the church is seen as one of a number of lifestyle choices to be made. It must compete in the market place with all other such choices.

4.2.3 Community split from locality

In the past, communities were more clearly defined. Based largely on geographical location, towns, villages or even streets formed the basis of many social groupings. People within these groups not only knew one another's name but also had significant information about each other's situations. Much of individual and community life was governed by what the community as a whole knew and approved of. Even after the Marriage Act of 1753, when compulsory registration of marriages, via the state church, was first legislated, marriage was a community affair. A couple were married when the community they lived in agreed together that they were married. In this, and many other areas of life, to act without the community's approval would bring shame and censure. Though written half a century after the Marriage Act, this model of

community life lies behind the novels of such authors as Jane Austin[26] and is the social milieu behind the early Baptists.

After geographical location, family relationships were key in forming and defining communities. Extended families, who tended to live in close proximity, exerted strong influence over each other, maintaining social order, again mainly through shame. Family members were responsible for each other. They provided education, welfare and health services, as well as support and identity for their members. Through a system of approval and censure they maintained social order, including a rigid class system.

The second half of the twentieth century saw a rapid collapse of both these community bases. For example, the end of the coal and steel industries, the *raison d'être* of many South Wales communities, together with increased mobility, led to the breaking up of both village and family life. Families were spread over a wide area and were no longer able to control its members. As this process has continued, homes have become self-contained centres from which people emerge only to go to work (and with the increased power of the internet even that is not necessary in a growing number of cases). Entertainment is piped in through TV and the internet, which also allows the necessities and luxuries of life to be ordered at a distance and delivered to the door by others with whom social interaction is unnecessary and unwanted. The extended family of the early part of the century had become by the late eighties the "2.4 children" generation. Recent figures show that the average household in Britain is now approaching 1.3 people[27]. Villages have become collections of these self-contained units and while many villages and areas of larger towns maintain a form of corporate life the older patterns of approval and censure have almost completely disappeared.

This does not mean that community is dead. New communities have formed, based not on locality or family ties but on a range of other things, particularly lifestyle choices. These communities are often temporary in nature with a constant changing of individual members. Foremost of these temporary communities is work[28], but others include school (both as pupils and parents), clubs, interest groups and voluntary societies and organisations, and church. People drawn together by their jobs or common needs and interests tend to form social groups. These groups are not always

well defined and membership of them is loose. However, they do exert social pressure on their members and operate a form of approval and censure (often referred to as peer-pressure). There are many similar social groupings and during an individual's life he or she will be a member of several such communities, often simultaneously.

Community life today, therefore, is typified by a web of overlapping relationships, of which the church is but one. The same person may be part of one community based in the office (with loyalty to the company and fellow workers expected), another based on a wider group of fellow and complimentary professionals (for example, fellow architects, planners, builders, *etc*), another centred around the children's school with teachers and other parents, others based on various clubs and yet another centred around the church. Each of these community groups will exert their own, often conflicting, pressures on members. These overlapping pressures must be taken into account in defining the theory and practice of belonging to a church.

There is one particular group that requires special attention when considering the new shape of network communities. The collapse of old locality and family based communities has been all but universal, but not everyone finds themselves part of a new network. There are an increasing number of people living on the fringes of these new communities. They are the unemployed, who not only have no work-based group to belong to but also, through lack of money, have limited social options[29]. They are the single parents, who have no time for anything other than subsistence living[30]. They are the old or disabled who are confined to their homes without family or friends. They are those who for a variety of reasons are not wanted by society and are unwilling or incapable of forming community links. These people, who are often referred to as the marginalised, or by the Biblical term, the poor[31], are without community. In considering how to be relevant and distinctive to those who live in new forms of community, those who live without community must not be overlooked.

4.3 Social engagement and current attitudes to membership

Churches are not the only organisations to have found it difficult to maintain levels of membership and involvement. Membership of all types of clubs, societies, organisations and groups has been falling. The decline in church membership outlined above is mirrored elsewhere. For example, political parties report a similar situation.

The combined membership of the Conservative and Labour Parties has fallen from 3.9 million to less than 700,000 in the last fifty years. At the same time membership demographics have changed. The average age of Conservative Party members is sixty-one with more than half over sixty-five. Membership of the Young Conservatives is down to less than 7,500, having peaked at over half a million. Twice as many people leave the Labour Party as join in the same period. Similarly, membership of the trade unions has been in decline for a number of years. In 1976 50% of the British workforce were members of a trade union. By 1995 that figure had fallen to 33%[32].

In other areas decline has been uniform. Organisations such as Scouts, Guides, Boys Brigade and the Women's Institute all reported considerable reductions in membership. Anecdotal evidence suggests that even in Wales, male voice choirs and brass bands, once an integral part of social life, particularly in the valleys, are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and hold members. Ruth Finnegan records the following story of musical groups in the Milton Keynes area of England:

> Sherwood choir was always concerned about its fluctuating membership. There was always membership loss as schoolchildren grew up and went away to college, as people moved to a new area, as work and family commitments changed, as illness or advancing years made it difficult for people to get out in the evening, as transport arrangements broke down, as people forsook the choir for another that sang their kind of music. The actual attendance at rehearsals was often much less than the paid-up membership. Week after week the conductor had to look at empty chairs and every now and then was provoked into launching into that well-known diatribe in all musical groups: castigating those who were there with the irresponsible absence of those who weren't. … The wonder was not that people left but that so many continued to turn out to rehearsals and concerts season after season. (Quoted in Richter and Francis 1998, 5)

The situation described is familiar in churches. The work involved in keeping any such group, especially small ones, going depends on a substantial commitment of time and energy. Any number of things could disrupt that commitment, such as moving away, marriage, parenthood, job pressures or internal disagreements. Members will then begin to complain that the others 'were not pulling their weight'.

It would be an over-simplification, however, to say that decline in church membership is just a reflection of a general decline in membership of organisations. Richter and Francis' research among church leavers showed that two-thirds belonged to other non-church groups or organisation at the time they left the church and that

membership of these other groups was maintained. (Richter and Francis 1998, 12-13) Similarly, people will join voluntary special interest groups when they feel strongly about the issues. Recent demonstrations covering issues such as anti-war protests, fair trade and debt relief, genetically modified plants, fox hunting (for and against) and even the routes of bypasses all show a high level of commitment. It may be that commitment to single issues is attractive as it requires a more defined amount of time and energy and often has a limited duration, but the willingness to commit is still there.

For a number of years politicians have been troubled by the lack of public engagement in the political process. The turnout at the last general election was an eighty year low, at 58%, with local elections even lower. The reasons cited include lack of trust and relevance. Both these same reasons are given by those leaving the churches. This willingness to engage in certain issues but withdraw from others is food for thought for those engaged in church and political life alike.

In 1998 the Henley Centre carried out a survey in which they ask people to list in order groups and organisations they felt they could trust. Companies like Coca-Cola, Nescafé, Heinz and Cadbury rated higher than the local church.[33] Commitment may not be the principle issue here. Many people appear to still want to be committed, but they are making choices from a wider field. Perhaps it is that the church no longer offers the option of commitment to anything that is perceived as worthwhile. As Richter and Francis conclude, 'In some cases commitment may not have declined: it may not have been there in the first place.' (1998, 13)

5 Towards a theology of belonging

For a doctrine of the church to become a theology of belonging it must be grounded in the life of the fellowship. This will involve bringing together an understanding of the doctrinal principles, the wider situation in which those principles are to be applied and the experiences, both good and bad, of those who have gone before. The search for a relevant theology is not only the search for new truths, it will also include new insights into old truths.

In a recent interview in *Talk* John Drane commented on the need for the Church to become more radical. He says, 'It is probably true to say that the Church is better at what I would call 'adaptation' than it is at true contextualisation.' (2003, 14) This call to contextualise rather than adapt is only possible when there is a committed desire on the part of a fellowship to reflect on the true needs of society within the framework of the Gospel. Adaptation, Drane says, 'affects only the peripheral aspects of (church) life – music, styles of dress, times and places of meeting.' Contextualisation on the other hand, 'asks a much more radical question; not, how can we make the message fit into the cultural landscape, but what does the Gospel look like in today's world?' (2003, 14) Without the safeguard of an understanding of, and commitment to, a doctrine of the church, and a respect for those who have faced similar issue before, such an endeavour to be 'contextually relevant' is at risk of losing its distinctiveness.

5.1 The Open Church

Although writing from a non-Baptist position, Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Open Church*, sets out a theology of belonging from which Baptists have much to learn. In the introduction to this book, Douglas Meeks summarises Moltmann's position: 'Reformation congregations with a genuine future will have to become passionate, evangelical, diakonal, missional, ecumenical, charismatic and aesthetic.' (Moltmann 1978, 16)

Moltmann's opening chapter speaks of a loss of passion among the churches, a failure, as he puts it, to experience life before death. For Moltmann passion is the opposite to apathy. Without passion there can be no future for the church. Apathy is

the real destroyer of fellowship. If there is no passion, if one ceases to care and grows used to the problems of others, then there can be no covenant relationship.

In the same way, to be evangelical, that is, to emphasise the atoning death of Christ as presented in Scripture; to be diakonal, living lives in loving service to one another; to be missional by being outward looking and inclusive; to be charismatic, acknowledging that all fellowship comes into existence and is maintained by the power of the Spirit, are all part of a covenant understanding of the church. Similarly, our ecumenism arises out of a covenant vision of God's people living and working together. It acknowledges that principle long voiced by Baptists that, 'each church and all the members of it are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ in all places' (1667 Confession). But Moltmann also reminds us that:

> Ecumenism does not come into existence because of a human vision of unity, albeit such a utopia of peace is important in view of the threatened destruction of humanity because of its divisions. Basically, it is not unity that brings salvation, but salvation which brings unity. Ecumenism does not derive from Christian power-politics *vis-à-vis* the state and secular society, even though there is a validity for the churches in the motto: "united we stand, divided we fall." The true Christian quality leading to unity is not the love of power, but the power of love. (1978, 84)

Finally, to be aesthetic,[34] or festive, is to be passionate about God and his world, particularly in worship. Covenant worship is seen as a feast, a festival celebrating the Resurrection. It is an open time when all those who have been touched by Christ can contribute and share. Such a festival is by its nature inclusive and open to spontaneity. It is a practical expression of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, in which each person can take an active part. This is another high risk strategy as such an open church is not to be controlled by the will of an elite leadership nor subject to the restraints of tradition.

5.2 Covenant – the basis of belonging

As argued above, Baptists of the late nineteenth century leaned toward a functional understanding of the church. While this did not necessarily preclude the relational understanding of earlier Baptists, the shift of emphasis has arguably led to a lack of a covenant understanding of church life today. Stephen Finamore writes:

> Many current practices which seem to be based on habit or pragmatism may be reinvigorated when they are understood in the light of covenant. It may be that they are not currently presented in covenantal terms. It may be that attitudes towards membership and church meeting within Baptist churches could be renewed were covenant taken seriously. Furthermore, some of the structures adopted by Baptist churches anxious to escape what appeared to be the dead hand of tradition may be seen as manifesting an inadequate understanding of covenant. (2002, 73)

Covenant offers a counter-cultural alternative to many of the world-views espoused by post-modernism. It challenges individualism and consumerism at their root by pointing to an understanding of life based on mutual dependency and fidelity, not on the fulfilment of personal choice. It also balances functionalism within the church.

5.2.1 Covenant *versus* contract

It is important that covenant is not regarded as a form of contract. A contract is a written or spoken agreement between two or more parties, intended to be morally or legally enforceable. It defines the duties, responsibilities and privileges of a relationship and sets limits on these. Contracts are closed; they detail what is expected from and due to each party. A covenant, on the other hand, is open. Although covenants usually do contain conditions these are descriptive rather than prescriptive, they encourage attitudes rather than define actions.

An example of this difference may be drawn from the health professions. Dr Ann Bradshaw, a nursing tutor and practitioner, points out that the origins of nursing care as we understand it are to be found in Christian compassion and a covenant duty to care for the weak and sick without thought of recompense. Although "worthy of their hire", the reason for compassionate action is not reward but need. Bradshaw writes:

> The principle of covenant vocation means that the nurse's primary responsibility is not to autonomous self-interest, personal fulfilment or career achievement; neither is it for research and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but always her responsibility is to the ethical ideal, for self-giving covenant service in the ministry of the patient. (1994, 306)

Bradshaw goes on to say that in the last half century, since the foundation of the national health service, there has been a steady eroding of this vocational ideal. It has largely been replaced by the concept of a contract for service, in which terms and conditions are set out and agreed, standards are set and procedures are established.

Each party involved, whether nurses, doctors or patients, knows what is expected. Bradshaw suggests, however, that by replacing covenant with contract there has been a diminishing in nursing care:

> [A] covenant understanding explicitly asks the nurse for a fidelity and commitment that go beyond that required by contract. The nurse is not merely to supply a service to those patients whom she particularly likes, to those who respond to her personally, or whose conditions she can improve physically, mentally or socially. She is asked to give the same commitment to all, regardless of their circumstances or personality. (Bradshaw 1994, 312)

Similar comments may be made of other public services where vocations have become professions and contracts have replaced covenant.

This inclination to define duties and responsibilities has spread throughout society, including the churches. Fellowships may no longer see it as the responsibility of the whole church to care for one another; a pastor is employed for this purpose. Members who view their belonging to a fellowship in contractual terms will tend to limit their involvement to what they consider their responsibility. This is somewhat different from a covenant understanding which starts not with responsibilities but with relationship, and asks (to paraphrase John F Kennedy) not what can my church do for me, but what can I do for my church.

5.2.2 Covenant signs

Baptists see themselves as a fellowship of believers living a covenant life together. They have always marked this relationship, both its beginning and continuation, with signs. These covenant signs are to be found in Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Believers' Baptism is seen primarily as a joining to Christ, and to his body, the Church – hence it is a part of any covenant theology. But it is also a public act, acknowledging an encounter with the risen Christ, and an initiation, an unrepeatable starting point for each individual. Paul Beasley-Murray says, 'Baptism expresses the believer's response of faith to the grace of God. Or to put it another way… Believers' Baptism stems from the Baptist model of a believers' church.' (1992, 9) It is for this reason that baptism is held to be for believers only and is not administered to infants. Wheeler Robinson says that for Baptists, both past and present, 'his emphasis on Believers' Baptism is the best guarantee that these truths [the essential principles of the

Christian religion] shall be recognised. In fact, his denominational position ultimately stands or falls with this contention.' (1938, 18) He adds, 'Believers' Baptism emphasises, as no other interpretation of the rite can ever do, the significance, the necessity and the individuality of conversion.' (1938, 18)

The Lord's Supper, on the other hand, is the ongoing sign of continuing fellowship and present convertedness. It is, 'the supreme expression of the fellowship of the Church as created by, and maintained in, the fellowship of individual believers with Christ.' (Robinson 1946, 97) and 'a pledge of fidelity renewing the vow of loyalty made personally in baptism.' (1946, 98) There are close links between these two ordinances[35], the one illuminating and reinforcing the other.

Not only do baptism and the Lord's Supper effectively express community and continuity, it is, as Wright points out, an action that 'is quickly understood by ordinary people to be coherent and appropriate' (2002, 59), and is thus a suitable symbol to today's post-modern society with its emphasis on individual choice and relevance. Kevin Roy says:

> There is a certain simplicity to the Baptist view of making baptism a confession of personal faith. But it is precisely this simplicity which is its strength. It requires no theological sophistication to understand, which is perhaps a reason for its powerful appeal to so many ordinary people possessed of a strong desire to follow Christ but having little formal theological training… For this reason Baptist theology has always felt that to ascribe anything to baptism where baptism is not an act of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ is likely to detract from the centrality and importance of faith, to which the whole Bible testifies so abundantly and unmistakably. (1977, 30)

Much the same could also be said of the Lord's Supper.

In the proclamation of the Gospel, particularly in today's frontier situation, baptism and the Lord's Supper are likely to continue to play a major role, not because they are culturally relevant, but precisely because they are so counter-cultural[36]. As Richard Kidd says, 'my prime responsibility [as a Baptist minister] is to see that [Believers' Baptism] "lives" in my own day. It is in danger of death when it no longer responds to the cultural challenges of the day.' (1996, 97)

One of the particular strengths of baptism and the Lord's Supper is their inclusiveness. Kidd notes that, 'baptism comes to represent an invitation to the external, to the outsider, to people with disabilities, to disadvantaged women; and it

celebrates the material of creation itself.' (Kidd 1996, 97) Similarly, meeting together around the Lord's table prevents those taking part from viewing one another as insiders or outsiders, for all are called to share in one loaf. In a time of social and cultural alienation this appeal to inclusivity and identity, though it has always been present, comes to the fore.

5.2.3 Covenant and risk

God's call to Israel to enter a covenant relationship was immediately open to interpretation, whether through honest seeking after the mind of God or malicious manipulation for selfish ends. Revelation, covenant and Incarnation are all high-risk strategies. Any theology of belonging that revolves around covenant must take these risks seriously. Although presenting a basis for a community of harmony and mutuality, offering purpose, identity, hope and blessing, covenant also opens a path to the dark side of human nature.

For Israel, living in covenant relationship with YHWH led to both blessing and curse. Both these aspects can be seen in the two primary covenant promises, that of land and identity. The reverberation of these blessings/curses are felt today in the middle-east and the wider world. The same covenant brings hope and despair, love and hate. As Graham Sparkes says, "Use of covenant theology to justify exclusion and oppression has continued, and many bear the scars and the wounds." (2002, 63)

Baptists, in particular, should understand that God's covenant intentions are inclusive, not exclusive, for Baptists have stood on the margins and known what it is to be excluded by those who hold power. Christian communities are to be ways of bringing people together, particularly the marginalised. Those who have no other community have a special place in God's community for he is the God of the poor (Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; Psalm 68:10). Those who live in covenant community are to be open and offer hope to the whole world. A community that sees itself in exclusive terms, by defining who is in and who is out, has missed the point.

5.3 Related issues

A number of issues arise out of a covenant approach to an open church. Three of these which are of particular importance are (1) how does authority and leadership function

within a covenant community, (2) how do local churches relate to larger groupings and (3) is there room for more than one type of church.

5.3.1 Authority and leadership

In a covenant relationship, where each person has freely agreed to be joined together, questions arises about authority and leadership within the community. Stephen Finamore puts it this way:

> The foundational place of covenant in baptistic understandings of the church has implications for Baptist understandings of ordained ministry. If covenant is the essence of the local church, then the presence of ordained ministry is not. Churches can and do exist without ordained ministers… While ministers and others may exercise a degree of authority by virtue of their particular callings, since the church can exist without them it follows that authority in the church cannot rest with them. (2002, 76)

Where then does this authority rest? Some would answer that it lies in the wider leadership of the church, appointed by God and recognised by the church. Many Baptist churches follow this pattern where deacons fulfil this role, acting as a kind of board of directors responsible to the shareholders (members) with the pastor acting as CEO. But such a model is based not on covenant. At best it comes from a different understanding of the church or, perhaps more often, from current business practice.

Early Baptist understanding of authority grew directly out of their understanding of the church. Finamore writes:

> Our churches consist of those who have publicly vowed, in baptism and covenant making, to follow Christ. While they will heed the advice of those with particular ministries among the churches, in the final analysis, humanly speaking, the covenanted members have nothing and nobody else to rely on in their commitment to be the church, other than their mutual promises. Seeking the mind of Christ for their shared life is therefore a matter of some urgency and is the responsibility of all. The church meeting is the name we give to the gathering of members for this purpose. (2002, 76)

The church meeting may appoint people to carry out certain pastoral, administrative and other tasks and to give it advice on discerning the leading of God, but the responsibilities freely undertaken by the members in covenant making cannot be delegated. It follows that such a fellowship relies on functioning members. Being part of such a church is not merely a matter of joining, it is a continuous, active belonging.

If authority is to be found in the church meeting, the place of leadership needs to be clarified. Baptists hold to the principle of the priesthood of all believers. All believers are therefore competent to carry out any responsibility within the fellowship. It is also recognised that individuals have different gifts. This idea of gift allows each member to contribute to the life of the church. Several of these gifts are listed in various places in the New Testament[37], but these lists are not exhaustive. Each fellowship seeks to enable its members to minister to one another as they encourage each other to discover, exercise and grow in their gifts.

However, although Baptists recognise the validity of ordained ministry, which grows out of a fellowship's need for stable and consistent leadership, there is no gift of "ministry". Although a minister will, it is hoped, be gifted in some way, it is not that gifting that qualifies her or him for ordained ministry. Ministers, as with other leaders, are specifically called to and recognised in their office. This two-fold approach is essential. Paul Fiddes says, 'church office is to be defined in terms of a *call* by Christ to *episkope* or *diakonia*, and a *recognition* of this by the Church.' (1983, 16, italics his) The role and duties of leaders will be considered in the next chapter.

Both Baptist doctrine and tradition place a high value on Scripture, so care must be taken to see that the Bible does not become detached from the daily life of the fellowship. Bishop Leslie Newbiggin says:

> Many Christians feel themselves to be in a position analogous to that which was the ground of complaint at the time of the Reformation. At that time the complaint was that the Bible had been taken out of the hands of the laity and become the property of the clergy. Now it has to be asked whether it has not become the property of the guild of scholars in such a way that the ordinary layman feels unable to understand it without the help of a trained expert. (quoted in Campbell 1987, 38)

It is the duty of leaders to ensure that the congregations appropriate Scripture to themselves, encouraging its study and use in daily life.

5.3.2 Associating

As early as 1689 the idea of individual fellowships sharing together was encouraged.

> In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration; wherein either the churches in general are concerned or by any one church in their peace, union and edification; or any member, or members of any church are injured in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to the

> truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet together to consider and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned, howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any church, or persons or to impose their determination on the churches or officers. (from the Second London Confession, 1689)

The practice of associating has continued to the present, and is the subject of continual review[38]. In a Baptist understanding of the church, the reasons for associating are the same as those which draw individuals into a particular fellowship. These include cooperation in God's mission, mutual support in the face of opposition and error, presenting an effective witness and demonstrating love beyond the narrow confines of one's own community. As Barrie White says, 'Fellowship is the lifestyle of the gospel. Interdependence is the mark of the converted – the search for independence was Adam's sin.' (1987, 29) He adds:

> The basis for associating is to be found in the early Baptists reading of the whole of Scripture. 'Fellowship in and between Churches is not created by trying to practice a few scattered New Testament texts, but by the gospel experience of the new life in Christ.' (White 1987, 28)

This last comment places a duty on fellowships to associate with one another. It is not simply something for large fellowships who have resources to spare, nor for small churches who need extra support. Nor is it a hierarchy, where stronger fellowships dominate weaker one. It is also a reminder that the fellowship of all the churches together will become the bride of Christ, not merely the local church.

The purpose and aim of associating is mission. According to *Relating and Resourcing*[39], 'The primary purpose of each regional association and its staff should be the fulfilling of Christian mission through its member churches, their members and ministers and the enabling of associating for this purpose.' (BUGB 1998, Recommendation 3:2)

5.3.3 Post-denominationalism

Darrell Jackson recently wrote a short paper entitled, 'Does the future have a denomination?' (2002, 18-23) This question is asked in the light of a distrust and cynicism regarding centralised and impersonal structures, and a trend toward post-denominationalism and post-institutionalism. Even among members of Baptist

churches it is not unusual to find those who question the need or even validity of a grouping beyond the local congregation. Relationships with other congregations, particularly in the immediate vicinity, may be considered important but such ecumenism is not seen in denominational terms. Indeed, denominations are often seen as a barrier to local cooperation and fellowship.

The Baptist Union was founded in 1813 as a 'voluntary society', similar to the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to the Heathen, now known (thankfully) as BMS World Mission. These voluntary societies were a feature of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain, and were seen as instruments for change in many areas of life[40]. Baptists came to be seen, and perhaps see themselves, as a denomination over a long period following the establishment of the Union. This has been particularly true of the first half of the twentieth century, and has been affected by a number of laws relating to, for example, charitable status and trusts.

If Baptists are to maintain a distinctiveness as a group, it should not do so to preserve denominational status. Given a covenant theology that calls fellowships to associate in voluntary societies at various levels, it seems likely that the Union is here to stay for the foreseeable future, but only so long as it enables local fellowships to fulfil their mission.

6 The shape of things to come

'If theology develops the finest theory possible without attending to the question of who is going to practice this theory, it remains suspended in the realm of possibilities.' So writes Douglas Meeks (Moltmann 1978, 14), or as AJP Taylor puts it somewhat more succinctly, 'We may be 100% right but 90% useless.' This last chapter seeks to suggest some practical guidelines that will increase our usefulness.

As the church seeks to responds to the changing world it is faced with three distinct possibilities. In the first place it may do nothing. This is in fact the most popular response. It points out that it is the world that has changed (for the worse) and that the Gospel remains unchanged. If the wrong is to be undone the world must return to the fold. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach – the world is indeed out of step with God and the Gospel remains true, relevant and powerful – but such a withdrawal fails to engage.

A second response may be to "get with the programme" and compete with other world views and lifestyle choices in the open market. Again, many churches have adopted this approach but unfortunately have failed to differentiate between style and substance (*cf* Drane's 'adaption *vs* contextualisation'). Simply up-dating the services does not change the content of worship or make it more meaningful or relevant. Again it fails to engage with the world except at a superficial level, though it may give the appearance of success for a time.

A third approach, therefore, might be an alternative form of withdrawal, not into a negative ghetto, but rather into a community that challenges the underlying values of twenty-first century Britain and lives out an alternative lifestyle. If the word withdrawal sounds overly negative then one might substitute separate, and so recognise the separatist tradition of the Baptist churches. Such separation is not a failure to engage. Rather, in the process of engagement it stands apart from society and offers a radical alternative in terms of lifestyle, believing and belonging.

6.1 What would an open church look like?

Keith Jones, in his book *A Believing Church*, posses a series of questions regarding the appearance of 'an authentic, radical and missionary community of disciples' (Jones, K 1998, 33-52). An authentic community is one that is true to its own claims, not false or artificial. To be radical is to depart from the normal or traditional and return to the root of the matter. It is to be committed to the search for renewal which involves stripping away the accretions of tradition and culture and looks for the roots of faith. A missionary community will have as its core value the demonstration, in word and action, of God's forgiving and healing, calling and enabling people to experience the love of God for themselves.

Such a community would recognise itself as being a church of the marginalised, a servant community, open and welcoming to those who have no other community and no voice of their own. It will also stand apart from the establishment, not seeking status or recognition within a system it must of necessity challenge.

In challenging society and speaking out for the voiceless, the covenant community will take the Bible seriously. Bible study will be done by both individuals and the community, with the whole people of God engaged in understanding it, not just the academic or ordained. Such study will not be regulated by tradition or dogma but will be an ongoing attempt to rediscover God's word to his people. In this attempt the emphasis will be on Jesus, and particularly the Cross, as the hermeneutical key for interpreting the rest of Scripture.

Covenant living also has an ethical dimension. The Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah and Amos, criticised the people of Israel for not living up to their covenant responsibilities. It is interesting to note that, theologically, the failure to honour the covenant precedes sin. It is not wrong behaviour that breaks the covenant, which is a covenant of grace and contains within itself the promise of forgiveness. By separating oneself from the covenant one is also separated from its promises. Forgiveness is no longer available (or requested) and what is not forgiven must be paid for. This is equally true of the horizontal component of covenant as of the vertical. Within the covenant relationship individuals should find acceptance and forgiveness, not only from God but from one another.

Because the covenant community is a gracious act of God there can be no discrimination or exclusivity. This includes but goes beyond questions of gender, race or class and offers a stable community to all in an unstable society. It will include not just those who are different, but also those who are rejected and despised, those who suffer, and those who are counted for nothing by the world.

A covenant community will also be an ecumenical community. It will not only want to share its convictions with others, it will also want to learn. Although it will stand firmly by its principles, such a community will not do so in an arrogant fashion that prevents it from gaining insights from the journeys and reflections of other Christians.

In standing with others, the covenant community will concern itself not only with the spiritual welfare of the wider community but with issues of peace and justice, human rights for all (not just for other Christians and those with whom it agrees), the environment, fair trading practices and other similar aspects of society.

In practical terms this will enable a church to meet the needs of both those within and without. It will be open to all whatever stage in the journey of faith they are on. In particular it will answer the voices raised by Richter and Francis and encourage the kinds of churches that might be worth staying in rather than leaving.

6.2 Belonging and…

Baptist churches consist not only of those who have covenanted together but also those who chose to attend, regularly or occasionally, various services, as well as those who have indirect contact with the church (for example, partners, children or parents of members), visitors and those who are temporary residents in the area. Such a church is made up of all those who call a particular fellowship, ‘my church’. This will include any number of different people; the old and the young (including children), single people and couples, those with families and those without, those who are mature in their faith as well as those who are just setting out on the journey (or are not yet ready for that step). It will include representatives from across the spectrum of the local and temporary communities in which the fellowship is based, whatever their class, age, background, race or gender.

Belonging to such a diverse fellowship brings with it a number of considerations. These may be grouped under three main headings: membership, ministry and mission.

6.2.1 Membership

The idea that the church comes along in second place to reinforce and support a faith that has been gained independently from it must be resist. Belonging to a fellowship is central to a covenant understanding of Christian discipleship, but simply being in a church, even regularly, is not to be equated with commitment. 'Church membership has little meaning unless it involves active participation in the life of a local church.' (Beasley-Murray 1992, 52)

Entry into the community of faith is initially by conversion[41], though most fellowships will also include those who do not yet believe, and yet have found a home. The place and importance of conversion cannot be over stated. Nigel Wright points out:

> To be converted is to be drawn by that Spirit into the community of God's people, which is sharing with God in this task, and to be incorporated as part of it. It is to work with God for the fulfilment of God's purpose: living out and speaking out the good news of Christ. (Wright 2002, 31)

In early Baptist fellowships the process of becoming a member of a fellowship could be protracted, lasting months or even years[42]. Today the situation is much different. People do not usually remain in one denomination throughout their lives. With a more mobile population, a local Baptist church may well have within the congregation people from a number of denominational backgrounds. Together with those with no previous experience of church, they may find the Baptist idea of membership completely foreign. Such people may not be open to the "quirky" ways of Baptists. They may believe and in their own way belong, but they may be excluded from certain church activities (voting, leadership, teaching) because they are not members.

One way of dealing with this situation, common in the past and still found in many churches, has been to have grades of membership, such as full, associate or communicant member. These were usually differentiated in terms of voting rights (as in the letter in the Introduction, above), but such a system is inappropriate if a business model of the church is to be avoided. Any membership system must take into account

the commitment of individuals to that particular fellowship, but it must do it inclusively not exclusively. A person may think of themselves as fully committed to a fellowship, they regularly attend Sunday services and other church functions, they help whenever possible and contribute generously to church funds. The fact that for one reason or another they do not feel able to accept Baptism nor wish to enter formal membership does not mean they have nothing to bring to the church as it seeks to discern the mind of Christ, or that God is unable to speak through them to the wider fellowship. On the other hand, those who do not wish to accept full responsibility for church life cannot expect to share in the full privileges of that life.

The problems of membership *vs* belonging will be particularly apparent in the changing patterns of church involvement. Until comparatively recently (that is, within the experience of some current church members) the usual path into a fellowship was believing, behaving, belonging. That is, a person came to faith, their way of life changed and they became part of the church. Today there are an increasing number of cases who belong, behave and then believe. They are, in some way, part of a church which influences their life, changing the way they think and act. Believing is the final step in their journey. 'The ability to welcome graciously those who are not yet "behaving" as Christians and to allow space and time for them to imbibe faith is a crucial skill.' (Wright 2002, 86)

It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between belonging and membership. Belonging to the fellowship is open to all and has certain responsibilities and privileges. Moltmann lists the following:

> Congregation, then, is no longer the sum of all those who are registered as members on the church rolls. Congregation is rather a new kind of living together for human beings that affirms:
> - that no one is alone with his or her problems
> - that no one has to conceal his or her disabilities
> - that there are not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say
> - that neither the old nor the little ones are isolated
> - that one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement, and
> - that, finally, the one can also at times leave the other in peace when the other needs it.
>
> (Moltmann 1978, 33)

Those who voluntary commit themselves to a covenant relationship take belonging to its natural conclusion. Although such covenanting membership will be open and plain for all to see, the steps taken to get there may not be. It is the responsibility of the fellowship to allow and encourage each person to participate in the life of the church as is appropriate to their commitment and place on their spiritual journey.

With a renewed interest in covenant making, many churches are reviving the practice of an annual covenant renewal. This usually takes the form of covenanting members making promises to God and one another as they gather around the Lord's Table, either at the beginning of the year or at a special service such as the church's anniversary. But such practices must not be taken lightly. Stephen Finamore says:

> Church covenants are not simply an institutional or administrative matter, nor a pragmatic option; they are a manifestation of divine life graciously finding expression in the life of God's people. Our churches are not primarily institutions, they are communities. (2002, 74)

Apart from *Covenant 21*, recently published by the Baptist Union, a number of fellowships have produced their own covenant documents[43]. They generally take the form of promises to be God's gathered people in that place. In some churches only members are expected to make these promises, but by inviting others to join together in the reading of the covenant they to may be encouraged to take the next step toward their own covenant commitment.

In this context, baptism and the Lord's Supper play a vital role. For this reason, if no other, Baptist churches need to maintain their distinctive stand on both these ordinances. They are not peripheral ceremonies, but reach to the heart of both covenant community life and the Gospel itself. Normally, re-baptism is to be avoided, but Baptists need to take seriously the implications of Believers' Baptism. In particular churches need to recognise that baptism is a community act and that fellowships baptise, not ministers, and that a request for baptism without commitment to the community should be treated with caution.

Similarly, fellowships must be equally serious about approaching the Communion Table. From the very beginnings of Baptist history there has been debate regarding the correctness of closed and open Communion. Those supporting the former

hold that the Table is only for those who have covenanted together. They point out that it is at the Lord's Supper that covenant fellowship is renewed, and the privileges and responsibilities of membership are brought to mind. Others hold that the Table should be open to all who believe (though not to all who belong) lest we be guilty of the charge, allegedly levelled at C. H. Spurgeon who practiced a closed table, that we acknowledge some people as good enough for the Lord but not for us. As a sign of inclusive, ongoing fellowship, it is perhaps more appropriate to invite all who love the Lord to share, but churches need to be reminded that the Lord's Supper is an act of fellowship with one another as well as a communion with God.

At the centre of church life should be the church meeting. It is here that those covenanting together express their corporate life. By sharing together in this way Baptists put into practice not only their covenant principles but also other theological principles such as the priesthood of all believers and the centrality of Scripture.

> By the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers Baptists not only understand that the individual Christian may serve as a minister to other members but also that each church member has equal rights and privileges in determining the affairs of the church. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2003 Electronic Edition, article 'Baptists')

The form of the church meeting is less important. Many churches are experimenting with new ways of discerning Christ's mind for his church, the important thing is that it is done in such a way as to allow all to play an appropriate part. This open, inclusive approach to membership, belonging and authority will have resonances with those living in a post-modern culture.

6.2.2 Ministry

Having been called by Christ to a specific office, and having been recognised by the church, a leader's role is then to enable the church to fulfil its mission. Douglas Meeks asks, 'Is it not a devastating irony that the more competent the "leadership" becomes in caring *for* the people, the less involved the people become and the less responsible they feel for the church?' (Moltmann 1978, 15 italics his) In this role the leader is similar to the conductor of an orchestra. There will be those in the orchestra who are better able to play individual instruments, but it is the conductor who enables a diverse group of gifted people to play together and produce a beautiful sound that is greater than the sum of its parts. The minister, together with the other leaders, will do this by helping the

fellowship to define its particular mission in the light of its own gifting and resources and the needs of the communities in which it serves. They will then enable the fellowship to develop appropriate strategies to fulfil that mission.

Derek Tidball has set out a pattern for pastoral leadership in the church. He states that to be a skilful shepherd the pastor must combine the lessons of Scripture with those of history. (Tidball 1986, 336) To effectively lead God's people a minister must reject the bureaucratic model of ministry, with its air of status, and base their ministry on spiritual calling, character and gifts. There must be no discontinuity between the spoken word of God and the miraculous work of the Spirit, so a minister must remain sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit as he works in the lives of all who belong to the fellowship. At the same time a pastor must remember that while he is a shepherd, he is also a sheep. This will place the pastor firmly within the body of Christ, enabling mutual support and reducing unhelpful distinctions between the leader and the led.

Scripture and history also teach ministers and leaders that ministry is always a plural exercise, drawing on the gifts and skills of all those who belong to the fellowship. This will lead to an understanding of the importance of developing those skills through encouragement, sound teaching and, where appropriate, specialised training. Finally leaders must lead. They will not be content to see the church remain where it is, but will always seek ways of helping both individuals and the fellowship as a whole to grow towards maturity. Tidball concludes by saying, 'They will not be managers, for managers deal in seen realities, but leaders, for leaders deal in unseen potentials.' (1986, 337)

6.2.3 Mission

Within the covenant community an alternative lifestyle is lived out. In both the Bible and in Baptist history this was seen as part of the mission of the Church. Israel was to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 51:4; 60:3). Jesus called his followers to be "lights to the world" (Matthew 5:14). Writing about the earliest Baptists, Keith Jones says that from the earliest days there was an emphasis on mission, not so much rooted in any particular words from Scripture, but rather flowing out of their understanding of covenant. 'Mission is the nature of the gathering community.' (Jones, K. 1998, 48) Covenant therefore has a missionary dimension that goes beyond the immediate

fellowship, and affects those outside the covenant relationship, and includes the whole world. As Nigel Wright puts it, 'Of all Christians, Baptist Christians should understand that unless we evangelize we die. The practice of Believers' Baptism means faith cannot be inherited – it can only be born anew in every generation.' (2002, 81)

Jean Vanier stresses the importance of mission within the life of any community of faith. He writes,

> Jesus' whole message is one of life-giving. He came to give life and to give it abundantly. He came to take away all the blockages that prevent the flow of life. Jesus came to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and imprisoned, and sight to the blind. He came to liberate, to open up new doors and avenues; he came to take away guilt, to heal, make whole and to save. And he asks his disciples to continue his mission. That is the mission of every Christian community. (1989, 87)

Mission is both the presence of God, seen in every loving act, and the proclamation of God's rule. This two-fold mission of presence and proclamation is expressed by those belonging to a community coming together for a shared purpose, then going out into the wider world to live out the implications the Gospel. This was a principle well understood by the Baptists of the nineteenth century. Whatever criticisms that can be made about cultural imperialism and a failure to differentiate between culture and Gospel, the Victorians were fired by a vision for the Kingdom of God. They understood that the church had a purpose in the world. Fuelled by the enthusiasm and optimism of the day, they dared to believe that they could make a difference. Just as Jesus called his disciples together and then sent them out to accomplish a mission, so God's people, living and working in community, can bring life to others. This life bringing mission is at the very core of a community's existence. As Bruno Bettelhiem says, 'I am convinced communal life can flourish only if it exists for an aim outside itself.' (Quoted in Vanier 1989, 90)

Today there are a variety of models for reaching out beyond the confines of the church. The most common of these are the cell church, the purpose-driven church and the seeker-sensitive church. Each of these models is presented as a way of bridging the gap between the church and the world. Commenting on these models Wright says:

> In each case there is a balance to be struck between those who are committed within the church and the openness of the church to those who are on or beyond its borders. This seems to me to be a fundamental aspect of effective congregational life: the capacity to build a committed membership while at the

> same time remaining radically and welcomingly open to those as yet beyond. (2002, 75)

He adds, 'I am tempted to say that it does not much matter which model is chosen to incarnate this principle. What is at stake is the reality expressed through the model.' (2002, 75)

If it is the purpose of each fellowship to take part in God's mission, how this is done will depend on God's calling and a churches gifts and resources. For larger tasks, such as world mission or supporting smaller churches and chaplaincies churches may work together, but, as Finamore says, although 'churches may group together for the sake of mission in other parts of the country or the world… each church's primary place of mission is the village, town or neighbourhood of which its members are a part.' (2002, 81) Baptist associations, unions and missionary societies primarily exist to enable local fellowship to respond to the needs of the wider world. Local fellowships will therefore commit themselves to working with others, both through established structures and, where appropriate, new networks, to fulfil its mission, but support for such organisations should not replace commitment to its own communities.

7 Conclusion

In an attempt to discover a way of belonging to the church that draws on Baptist principles and experience it has been shown that, while based on their reading of Scripture, Baptists trace their origins back to the radical reformation and the founding of the first Baptist churches in Britain in the early seventeenth century. Growing out of their understanding of Scripture these early Baptists laid the foundation of a doctrine of the church that remains largely unchanged. The cornerstone and logical outcome of this doctrine was the idea of Covenant. This covenant defined a fellowship, its mission, its ministry and, in particular, its membership. It was the key to moving from not-belonging to belonging, and set out the pattern of relationship within a covenant community. To be a member of a Baptist church was to be in a covenant.

Subsequent history has shown that covenant is an enduring model and allows insights into both theology and the practice of the church that go wider than just issues of membership, touching on ethics, worship and salvation. It has also shown that covenant is not an infallible structure. History is full of examples of failed attempts to live up to the call to be God's gathered people. Yet many insights have stood the test of time and are now widely accepted by other Christian groups. These lessons have often been the result of hard experiences and need to be passed on, not least to today's Baptists who are frequently ignorant of Baptist history, for as Nigel Wright says, 'The Baptist way of being the Church does indeed reflect insights which are integral to the gospel and are not to be given up.' (1987, 41)

Historical reflection without an understanding of contemporary situations is only of academic interest. As past generations had to re-apply their principle to new situation so today Baptists must look carefully at the world around them. Post-modernism raises a number of issues which Baptists, through the covenant approach to church life, are well placed to meet. Principle among these is the post-modernist search for identity. But Baptists, like other Christians, need to understand that they face a very complex situation and must refrain from giving trite answers. Given the diversity of society and culture in Britain today it will be seen that there can be no 'one size fits all'

solution. It is well to remember Robin Gill's warning: 'Sweeping historical models are unlikely to provide a satisfactory basis for the context of theology.' (1975, 131)

Post-modernism stresses another concern that all churches must take seriously. Churches have no right to expect special treatment from the world at large. Again, Baptist have understood this and have, at least in the past, argued for both toleration and separation. Baptists have not sought special recognition for themselves and today they must acknowledge that they must compete with all other life choices on an equal footing.

A combination of doctrine, history and understanding of the contemporary situation leads to the possibility of a theology of belonging that is both relevant and distinct. According to Jürgen Moltmann, maintaining both relevance and identity is the 'double crisis' of the church (1974, 7). The more the church seeks to be relevant to the needs of people the greater the pressure on its distinct identity. This was the problem faced by the Victorian church. On the other hand, in an effort to maintain a Christian identity the church is always at risk of becoming irrelevant, as happened to the church in the years following the end of persecution in 1689. A covenant approach to the church, while not guaranteeing these pitfalls will be avoided, will help the church face this double crisis. It does this firstly by giving a sense of identity to both the community and the individual. A covenant community is marked a sense of purpose and direction. It has a foundation, a history and a future. Secondly, covenant is relevant for it raises key issues that touch those living in a post-modern society in a way that is both open and counter-cultural at the same time.

this theological reflection is aimed at changing the life of the church by making it more able to fulfil its mission. Churches must continue to ask themselves what kind of fellowship will help people to find a spiritual home, and so enable them to belong as they make their own journey towards believing and deeper belonging. Covenanting fellowships, who take their relationship with each other as seriously as their relationship with God, are well placed to meet this need. Specifically, such fellowships will be churches that:

- Provide space for spiritual development rather than spoon-feeding their members.

- Focus on God rather than the minister or the programmes.
- Offer authentic community and friendship rather than institutional forms of belonging or insipid forms of fellowship.
- Engage creatively and sensitively with contemporary culture as well as social and ethical issues.
- Equip their members for the world of work.
- Treat adults as adults.
- Allow room for dialogue as well as monologue.
- Are self-critical, especially in relation to power politics.
- Allow doubts, anger and lament as well as joyful certainty.
- Are realistic about the rhythms and pressures of modern life.
- Have a holistic vision rather than a privatised spirituality.

A fellowship open to these possibilities will answer John Drane's call to contextualise the Gospel rather than simply adapting it to meet superficial considerations.

Every part of church life will be affected by these things. Taking seriously the call to walk together in a covenant community will go a long way towards meeting Moltmann's plea for a 'passionate, evangelical, diakonal, missional, ecumenical, charismatic and aesthetic' church.

In recent years a number of theologians, Baptists and others, have realised that after all the theological reflection, historical insight and sociological study, theology has an intensely personal aspect. This is particularly apparent in a study of believing and belonging in a post-modern culture. Walter Brueggemann points to the personal aspect of the covenant relationship when he writes:

> While the notion of faithfulness admits of immense variety in the Old Testament, the key point is not to be missed: what is known of YHWH and what keeps YHWH and Israel connected to each other is a mutual, elemental loyalty in the prospect of a shared life of well-being. This notion of fidelity, so pivotal in biblical faith, is a peculiar treasure in the contemporary world that often wants either (a) to dissolve relational fidelity into a contractual matter that limits and eliminates personal loyalty, or (b) to flatten fidelity into certitude as if a defining relationship could ever be merely or mainly cognitive. The mutual passion of the covenant partners for each other and the will for rehabilitation of the relationship prevent both dissolution into contract and flattening into cognition. (2002, 78)

Baptists would underline this and point out that they have always understood the Gospel in terms of a personal relationship with Christ. In the strictest sense, there are no second generation Baptists, and every Baptist church is only one generation from extinction.

More than this, however, the covenant relationship should encourage Baptist Christians to understand that changes in Baptist church life do not happen 'top down'. If changes are needed to allow an open, covenant community to flourish, those changes will happen within the lives of individuals. Miroslav Volf makes the point when he says, 'Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, [we should] explore *what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others.' (1996, 20f italics his) In the same way, Marcus Bull states, 'Rather than asking political questions about the nature of what the church should be, the cross demands that I examine myself.' (2002, 52) This is a point well understood by the first Baptists who studied their Bibles with Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the hermeneutical key. Before any theology or praxis can be called Christian it must be seen in the light the life and ministry of Christ, and particularly of the Cross.

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Notes

[1] Care needs to be taken in interpreting these figures. The same census showed that 390,000 people claimed to be 'Jedi', the fictitious religion of the 'Star Wars' films, which make Jedi the forth most popular religion in England and Wales after Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

[2] A brief and balanced (if somewhat American) account of Baptist distinctiveness is to be found in an article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2003 Electronic Edition.

[3] Throughout this document the word 'fellowship' is used to describe a group of Christians meeting together in one particular place, as distinct from 'church' which is used in the wider context of the general organization of Christianity. The Church (capitalised) refers to the world-wide organization as a whole.

[4] Figures provided by the Department of Research and Training in Mission, Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Baptist Union of Wales.

[5] Traditionally this is drawn from such passages as Acts 2, 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Peter 2:4-10.

[6] See, for example, those representing a number of different traditions such as Louis Berkhof, J Barton Payne, Deryck Sheriffs, Walter Brueggemann, David Clines, Gordon Wenham, Brevard Childs and Walther Eichrodt.

[7] Although circumstances beyond the control of individuals may force them into such a situation, this is not to be regarded as the norm.

[8] See, for example, the suggested orders of service in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1991.

[9] The Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Baptist Union of Wales.

[10] The Association of Grace Baptist Churches.

[11] These distinctives are set out in the study paper, *What are Baptists?* presented to and commended by the Division for Theology and Education of the European Baptist Federation in 1993.

[12] In 1663 twelve Baptists were condemned to death by Buckinghamshire Assizes for contravention of the older Tudor law but were pardoned by the Charles II after a wealthy Baptist merchant and friend of the king interceded on their behalf. The king was said to be surprised that the sentences were legal.

[13] Sentence was often passed on the evidence of uncorroborated evidence of a witness who received part of the fine in payment. There is also evidence of the misuse of the law to raise money for town authorities (see Underwood 1947, 118).

[14] The story of William Jones is taken mostly from secondary sources and can not be verified on several points (see Owens 1976, 95 and Bassett 1977, 44).

[15] The end of Peel's prime ministry and the repeal of the Corn Laws.

[16] See http://tiger.iso.port.ac.uk:7778/pls/nfp/gbhdb.gbh.section?section_id=cen_rel. Only summaries are available on the Internet. Access to the original documents is restricted (see http://catalogue.pro.gov.uk/Leaflets/ri2192.htm.

[17] During his years at the Metropolitan Tabernacle (1861-1892) Spurgeon preached to 10,000 people each Sunday.

[18] Other fellowships would have occasionally discussed the calling of a Pastor, but this was not an issue for Praed Street.

[19] The 1851 Census suggests that only 20% of attenders were also members.

[20] 'Triennial statistical returns' in *Minutes Of Conference And Directory* London: Methodist Church Conference Office, 1996, 61-70.

[21] *Church Statistics: Parochial Membership And Finance Statistics For January To December 1995* London: The Central Board of Finance of the Church of England, 1997.

[22] These figures are taken from Richter and Francis 1998, xi.

[23] Figures provided by Baptist Union of Great Britain, January 2002 (private communication).

[24] From 'Statistics of Associations' *Baptist Union Of Wales Handbooks 1993-2001*.

[25] Graham Cray in a lecture to the 2002 Baptist Union of Great Britain Assembly.

[26] For example, the scandal caused by Frank Churchill's secret engagement to Jane Fairfax in *Emma* (first published 1816) and the story of *Silas Marner* by George Eliot (1861).

[27] Elaine Storkey in a lecture to the theology department of Cardiff University, May 2003.

[28] Whereas once one's work was a permanent choice, with the end of 'a job for life' work-based communities are now to be considered temporary.

[29] Employment statistics for England and Wales 2001 (all people aged 16-74):

Employed	22795520 (60.6%)
Unemployed	1261343 (3.4%)

Long-term unemployed	382388 (1.0%)
Student (economically active)	965341 (2.6%)
Retired	5118950 (13.6%)
Student (economically inactive)	1766784 (4.7%)
Looking after home/family	2448856 (6.5%)
Permanently sick or disabled	2076243 (5.5%)
Other inactive	1174401 (3.1%)

(from: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/727-a.asp)

[30] There are 21,660,475 households in England and Wales according to Census 2001, and 30.0 per cent of these (6.5 million) are one-person households - up from 26.3 per cent in 1991.

Nearly half of the one-person households (3.1 million) are one-pensioner only households and three-quarters of these (2,366,000) are occupied by a woman living on her own. However, in the remaining 3,376,000 one-person households, male occupants outnumber women by three to two.

Single-person households are least likely to have amenities such as central heating or sole use of a bath/shower and toilet. More than one-in-eight of single-person households do not have central heating - this amounts to over 383,000 pensioners and over 430,000 non-pensioners.

Over 70,000 single-person households do not have sole use of a bath/shower and toilet - 21,000 of these being pensioners. More than half of pensioners living alone have a limiting long-term illness (52.8 per cent). In pensioner-family households, 60.4 per cent contains someone with a limiting long-term illness.

The statistics for England and Wales (2001) are:

Marital status (all people aged 16 and over)	
Single people (never married)	12511319 (30.1%)
Married or re-married people	21158471 (50.9%)
Separated or divorced	4406650 (10.6%)
Widowed	3476740 (8.4%)
Transport (all households)	
Households without car/van	5802183 (26.8%)
Household with 1 car or van	9486366 (43.8%)
Household with 2 or more cars/vans	6371926 (29.4%)
Composition (all households)	
One person households	6502612 (30.0%)
Married couple households	7915315 (36.5%)
Cohabiting couple households	1794451 (8.3%)
Lone parent households:	
with dependent children	1399939 (6.5%)
with non-dependent children only	663547 (3.1%)
All other households	3384611 (15.6%)

(from: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/727-a.asp)

[31] For an analysis of the Biblical use of the term ‘poor’ see Storkey 1986, 67-82.

[32] It should be noted that trade union membership, as well as being affected by other social trends, has been greatly impacted by recent legislation.

[33] Moynagh, Michael, 2000, *Tomorrow: Using The Future To Understand The Present* The Tomorrow Project: Kings Lynn, p39.

[34] An expression taken from RC ascetical theology, that is appreciative of, responsive to, or zealous about the beautiful.

[35] Though sometimes described as “Sacraments”, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are referred to here as “ordinances” to distinguish them from the sacramental approach of other traditions.

[36] Many denominations that practice infant baptism also have provision for adult baptism for use with those who come from an unchurched background.

[37] For example, 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; Romans 12.

[38] The latest of these is *Relating and Resourcing* published in 1998. It was a national initiative to examine association life with BUGB and to offer recommendation as to how this life could be strengthened. This followed a number of individual Action In Mission (AIM) reports carried out by churches and associations in the late 1980s.

[39] See previous note.

[40] In Britain these included anti-slavery, prison reform and universal suffrage. There were a number of similar societies (often called clubs) in USA.

[41] Children, and others who can not give an informed intellectual accent to the principles of the faith, should not be considered an exception to this. Conversion is not an intellectual process (though it may include the intellect). Conversion, or more appropriately convertedness, is a spiritual process commensurate with the wider experience of the person. A three year old may be the person God wants them to be just as much as a thirty year old.

[42] See Smith 1999 and Hayden 1996 for examples of early membership procedures.

[43] The covenant of the Baptist Church in Westbury-on-Trym in Bristol was drafted by G. Henton Davies in 1947. The original text reads:

> WE, the Foundation Members of the Westbury Baptist Church,
>
> REMEMBERING that when God had redeemed His people Israel from the bondage of the Egyptians, He made a Covenant with them, whereby He became their God and they His people:
>
> AND RECALLING that, when this same people had broken this Covenant, God promised that He would make a new Covenant with them, written in their hearts with forgiveness of sins, and knowledge of Him:
>
> AND BELIEVING that the promise of this new Covenant was fulfilled in the Person and Work of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His Death on the Cross, and in His glorious Resurrection:
>
> DO SOLEMNLY COVENANT TOGETHER that we will respond to this, His great love toward us, "in repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ", by maintaining in this place the ministry of the Word and the observance of Ordinances;
>
> Walking in obedience to Christ, as His Will is made known to us by the Holy Spirit;
>
> And setting ourselves to extend His Kingdom throughout the world, in fellowship with the whole Church, and over the whole range of life, personal, social, economic and international;
>
> IN TOKEN WHEREOF WE PLEDGE OURSELVES
>
> To faithful attendance at Divine Worship, whereby we give to God the glory that is His due, and receive His gifts of Grace;
>
> To the regular practice of prayer and meditation, whereby we gain an understanding of God's Will, and strength to perform the same;
>
> To loyal support of the work and witness of His Church, by personal service and conscientious giving.

(Finamore 2002, 85f)