

## KEITH CLEMENTS: A BAPTIST ECUMENIST

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What broadly connects Keith Clements' collection of published books and articles together is an on-going argument for the importance of ecumenism. It is no surprise that the subtitle of his autobiography *Look Back in Hope* is 'An Ecumenical Life.' Ecumenism has shaped Clements' life, ministry and theology. He writes that *Look Back in Hope* is "an account of my life as a whole in which ecumenical commitment became central."<sup>1</sup> For this reason he stands out as one of the leading Baptist ecumenical theologians of the last thirty years. Alongside other contemporary British Baptists like Myra Blyth and Simon Oxley, he has held positions, both national and international, within the ecumenical scene.<sup>2</sup> He was the co-ordinating secretary of international affairs at the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland (1990–1997)<sup>3</sup> and then General Secretary of the Conference for European Churches (1997–2005).<sup>4</sup> He was a member of the WCC Faith and Order Committee between 1985 and 1998 and of the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation, 1986–1990. He is the author of over ten books covering modern theology,<sup>5</sup> ecumenism,<sup>6</sup> and most notably the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of whom he is a leading interpreter.<sup>7</sup> His other contribution, not to be overlooked, is a biography of the early British ecumenist J. H. Oldham and an extensive record of the meetings Oldham oversaw known as the Moot.<sup>8</sup> Ordained as a Baptist minister in 1967, Clements pastored two churches before becoming a tutor at Bristol Baptist College (1977–1990). He has also been the editor of the *Baptist Quarterly*, the journal of the Baptist Historical Society

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<sup>1</sup> Keith W. Clements, *Look Back in Hope: An Ecumenical Life* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2017), x.

<sup>2</sup> Myra Blyth was Youth Secretary of the British Council of Churches, 1982–1988 and then held, 1988–1999, before becoming Deputy various positions in the World Council of Churches General Secretary of the Baptist Union, 1999–2003, which at the time made her the Union's national Ecumenical Officer. Simon Oxley was General Secretary of the National Christian Education Council, 1984–1992, then County Ecumenical Officer for Great Manchester, 1992–1996 and then Executive Secretary for Education in the World Council of Churches, 1996–2008.

<sup>3</sup> This was a new position as British ecumenism shifted from the British Council of Churches to the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland following the inter-church process in the 1980s. (The body was renamed again in 1999 as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.) For an account of that process see Derek Palmer, *Strangers No Longer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Clements was the second Baptist to hold this position after Glen Garfield Williams who had been the first General Secretary of CEC between 1968–1986.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Clements, *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth Century Theologies Controversies in England* (London: SPCK, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Keith Clements, *Learning to Speak* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997); *The Churches in Europe As Witnesses to Healing* (Geneva: WCC, 2003); *Ecumenical Dynamic* (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> He has authored five books on Bonhoeffer and was editor of Volume 13 of the English Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works series, *London 1933–1935* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007). Keith Clements, *A Patriotism for Today: A Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol Baptist College, 1984, reprinted in 1986 by Collins); *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol Baptist College, 1990); *Bonhoeffer and Britain* (CCBI, 2006); *The SPCK Introduction to Bonhoeffer* (London: SPCK, 2010); *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: WCC, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999); (Ed.), *The Moot Papers: Faith, Freedom and Society, 1938–1947* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010).

in the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> He received his PhD from the university of Bristol in 1997.<sup>10</sup> Since his retirement, he has been a visiting faculty member at Whitley College, Australia, where he has taught courses on Bonhoeffer and on churches and peacemaking.<sup>11</sup>

Clements is as an ecumenical theologian. He has written little what might be called specifically Baptist theology. It is perhaps for this reason that while Baptist contemporaries like Paul Fiddes, Nigel Wright,<sup>12</sup> and John Colwell have been widely read in Baptist colleges by those training for ministry, the name Keith Clements is probably known by far too few. Clements is an example of another ‘expert’ that English Baptists have failed to properly heed.<sup>13</sup> Clements deserves to be read as an interpreter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose life and work continue to stimulate much reflection on what it is to be Christian today.<sup>14</sup> He deserves to be read as one who shows what ecumenism is and why it matters, and, more specifically in this regard, Clements merits being read for his knowledge and experience of Christian witness in Europe. This latter is extremely important in the present situation in the United Kingdom, which has been, churches included, too ambivalent about Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Clements reads Bonhoeffer historically as well as theologically.<sup>16</sup> He finds Bonhoeffer a living voice for the church today. He does not read Bonhoeffer as an academic exercise. His early book on Bonhoeffer is one that focuses on the question of patriotism, to which Bonhoeffer is his dialogue partner. Through the witness of Bonhoeffer, Clements explores how love of country and love of Christ might properly, that is, theologically, be ordered. The answer in part, he says, being an ecumenical one, on which we will say more below.<sup>17</sup> His second book on Bonhoeffer is one that examines his ‘continuing challenge’ and how they might bear on “concrete issues we face today.”<sup>18</sup> It arose out of the opportunities to speak, (many ecumenical,)

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<sup>9</sup> Clements was editor 1980–1985. During this time he also edited *Baptists in the Twentieth Century* (Baptist Historical Society, 1983), which was a set of papers from the July 1982 BHS summer school. He contributed a chapter on the relationship between British and German Baptists during the 1930s and 40s.

<sup>10</sup> This was on the basis of published works. See *Look Back in Hope*, 264.

<sup>11</sup> Clements, *Look Back in Hope*, 364–65, 370.

<sup>12</sup> I have written elsewhere on Paul Fiddes and Nigel Wright. See ‘Paul Fiddes – Baptist Servant of the Church’, *Baptist Minister’s Journal* (October 2012): 3–7; ‘Nigel Wright’s Radical Theology’, *Baptist Quarterly* 48.2 (April 2017): 69–77.

<sup>13</sup> The word ‘expert’ has of course been put under scrutiny in the UK, especially after the Leave EU politician Michael Gove infamously said ‘Britain has had enough of experts’ in June 2016. I use the word following John Lyons (writing in 2011) who said that ‘Baptist churches will need the help of such “experts” as they have to hand, whether such individuals are theologians, biblical scholars, pastors, sages, or even suitable outsiders’, W. John Lyons, ‘In Appreciation of “Reluctant” Prophets’ in Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (eds.), *The ‘Plainly Revealed’ Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercy University Press, 2011), 299.

<sup>14</sup> The 13 volume English translation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer works is a sign of his on-going importance as a theologian, and with that the steady flow of books on and in response to his work. How good it is to have an English Baptist in amongst those working on Bonhoeffer.

<sup>15</sup> In the run-up to the vote on Britain’s membership of the European Union in 2016, Clements wrote an article ‘The EU Debate and the Gospel’ which appeared on the *Baptist Times* website [http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/469860/The\\_EU\\_debate.aspx](http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/469860/The_EU_debate.aspx). There has been little theological reflection on Europe, although see Jonathan Chaplin and Gary Wilton (eds.), *God and the EU: Faith in the European Project* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Clements argues for the importance of both systematic theology and church history to inform one another in Keith Clements, ‘The Mutual Contributions of church History and Systematic Theology: The Holocaust and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Case Study’, *Pacific* 20.2 (2007): 162–84.

<sup>17</sup> The penultimate chapter of *A Patriotism for Today* is headed ‘True Ecumenism and True Patriotism’, 150–163.

<sup>18</sup> Clements, *What Freedom?*, v.

that were issued from readers of *A Patriotism for Today*.<sup>19</sup> Even his most recent study of Bonhoeffer, which is a more straight historical account of the theologian's ecumenical involvement, concludes with asking what we learn in today's on-going ecumenical quest.<sup>20</sup>

This close reading of Bonhoeffer began in his days as an undergraduate at King's College, Cambridge and has been the key shaper of Clements' theological mind. Other theologians often start with a theologian and then move on to others in the tradition. Bonhoeffer has remained a constant companion in Clements' theological journey and thought. This in part reflects Bonhoeffer's shared commitment to ecumenism, which has also been part of Clements' life from his university days. His discovery of Bonhoeffer was joined at the same time by his encounter with a Christianity wider than his Baptist upbringing.

Clements most early discussion of ecumenism is in *A Patriotism for Today*. Here he argues that ecumenism is not just those activities of bringing different denominations together in unity, but, and more importantly, the "manifestation of the universal church across the world of nations."<sup>21</sup> To be a Christian is more determinative than being a citizen of any particular nation.<sup>22</sup> Ecumenism is for this reason not an 'extra' to the life and belief of the church, it is a "dimension of all we do."<sup>23</sup> If ecumenism challenges nationalism, it also, says Clements, challenges "denominational introspection."<sup>24</sup> He takes as an example, how some in the Church of England have a "vastly exaggerated opinion" of itself, which makes church relations with others more difficult. (Over thirty years later, it's not always obvious much has changed in this regard.) Clements argues for British Christians to be more ecumenical, more catholic, to recognise our "belonging to the one holy, catholic and apostolic church of all times and places."<sup>25</sup> He says this with no comment here on Baptists, for whom, at least a good number in the 1980s would not have shared this view.

Clements moves his argument on to look at the example of Bonhoeffer as an ecumenist and the tensions this generated with his love of Germany. While being Christian is more determinative, Clements does not overlook the reality of our being citizens and of the world as it currently is. Bonhoeffer chose to return to Germany and the reality of what was happening there, where he could have stayed in the United States, in an ecumenical bubble. It was this decision says Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge that "made him ecumenically so alive."<sup>26</sup> Ecumenism then ultimately is more than churches becoming one, eschatologically it is the nations discovering their *oikumene* in God. Bonhoeffer, instead of abandoning Germany, was an ecumenical witness within his country at its darkest hour and in this Clements says, "ecumenism and patriotism coincide."<sup>27</sup> We cannot forget that nations exist, that we are people of some place, of some country. The gift of the ecumenical vision is that we do not have a false view of our

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>20</sup> See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*, 271–300.

<sup>21</sup> Clements, *A Patriotism for Today*, 150.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>23</sup> Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Clements, *A Patriotism for Today*, 153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>26</sup> Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr* (London: Collins, 1975), 79 cited in Clements, *A Patriotism for Today*, 159. Clements got to know Bethge and his wife, Bonhoeffer's niece, and this I think probably added to his interest in Bonhoeffer.

<sup>27</sup> Clements, *A Patriotism for Today*, 161.

country, that in Christ, patriotism does not become an idol. In later work Clements describes this as ‘living in more than one place at once’, what he calls the “ecumenical dynamic.”<sup>28</sup>

Clements is one committed to the institutions of ecumenism. He has been, in his words, a “professional ecumenist.”<sup>29</sup> However he sees ecumenism as something bigger than merely the professional side of ecumenism in its structures and bodies. This is picked up by his use of the word ‘dynamic.’ Where institutional ecumenism, even in its heyday of the 1960 to 1990s, could look like the slow, patient, perhaps not very exciting work, of meetings, and statements and words, Clements has always seen it and experienced it as something lively. It is the meeting of Christians, who discover something greater than their own understanding of Christianity. Clements quotes the former General Secretary of the Baptist Union, David Russell, who after his first international ecumenical experience said, “I began to realise that my God – my God – my Scottish Baptist God – was too small.”<sup>30</sup> This does not mean, although for some ultimately it does, that you leave behind your theological convictions as, for example, a Baptist, but it does expand your horizons beyond what is ultimately only one (relatively small<sup>31</sup>) way of following Jesus. Ecumenism for Clements is accepting this ‘living in more than one place at once’ as a gift and as check on all ‘identities and loyalties’ outside of that in we have in Christ.<sup>32</sup> For Clements ecumenism and discipleship cannot be separate,<sup>33</sup> being a disciple is to be open and committed to the ecumenical venture of meeting, working, partnering, worshipping together as Christians.

This vision and passion for ecumenism, long-lived in Clements, is in *Ecumenical Dynamic* and *Look Back in Hope*, tempered by his sadness and disappointment in the ecumenical scene, especially in the United Kingdom, of the last ten to fifteen years. We read of his increasing frustration in the last decade at the downgrading of ecumenism within the UK,<sup>34</sup> in what had been the great promise, hope, and declared commitment in 1990 to the new ecumenical instruments, which included for the first time the Roman Catholic church and many of the black Pentecostal churches.<sup>35</sup> Ecumenism in the UK has become an extra, one largely now under-funded and marginalised as many of the historic churches are consumed by introspection about their on-going survival.<sup>36</sup> Current ecumenism in the UK lacks the leaders to “plot a future path”,<sup>37</sup> to call their denominations and others to engage in visible unity. Clements sees the death of Basil Hume, who had done so much in the 1980s as a symbol of the decline.<sup>38</sup> He also argues that reasons

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<sup>28</sup> Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>31</sup> This I take to be the point of Russell’s reference to ‘*Scottish* Baptist God’, for even exposure to Baptists from Europe and wider, would demonstrate that being Baptist looks very different in other places.

<sup>32</sup> Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>35</sup> This followed the 1987 Swanwick Declaration which saw the British Council of Churches replaced by the Churches of Council of Britain and Ireland (CCBI) and the national bodies of Churches Together in England (CTE), Churches Together in Wales and Action of Churches Together in Scotland.

<sup>36</sup> For an account of ecumenism from the perspective of the United Reformed Church see Martin Camroux, *Ecumenism in Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic*, 13. Basil Hume, the then leader of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales gave an address at the 1998 British Baptist Assembly, which would probably have been impossible a decade earlier.

for the ecumenical winter are the growth of evangelicalism which regards ecumenism as a “distraction from the ‘real task’ of the church”; the priority of inter-faith relations, especially after 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001; and internal church divisions, most obvious being that of that sexuality.<sup>39</sup>

Clements response to this is to tell ecumenical stories. Following his own ecumenical story, the main chapters of *Ecumenical Dynamic* seek to offer some examples in Anglo-German relations pre- first World War, Edinburgh 1910, Barmen 1913, Bishop George Bell, Oldman’s Moot gatherings, and the work of CEC. He sees these stories as “creative episodes”, “resources of value”, and offering “echoes of hope.”<sup>40</sup> For Clements, they tell a different, but an equally (if not even more) important story that is otherwise told about the beginnings of WCC and its subsequent work.

Our own Baptist ecumenical story might be one that failed to ignite and provide opportunities for a new generation. Clements own involvement ecumenically stemmed, in part, from the example and encouragement of Morris West, who had likewise had a tutor in Ernest Payne.<sup>41</sup> It is not clear who has taken up the mantle. However, at the level of the Baptist World Alliance, there is perhaps some encouragement seen in the bi-lateral conversations with the Anglican church,<sup>42</sup> the Roman Catholic church,<sup>43</sup> and currently the Methodist church,<sup>44</sup> although this must at the same time be tempered by the fact that the fruit and content of these reports fail to reach those in churches or even challenge our national decision making bodies, most obviously in England the Baptist Union Council.<sup>45</sup> The whole journey of getting English Baptists to join the CCBI and CTE in 1989 and then again in 1995<sup>46</sup> has not produced any real ecumenical commitment, which maybe why so many Baptists were happy to vote yes on those two occasions, for in the long run it required nothing really of them. This is reflected by the comment from the Reformed historian David Thompson (a university friend of Clements), who has said “The Baptists have not actually been interested in talking to anybody really.”<sup>47</sup> This has not been true of many individual Baptists,<sup>48</sup> but of Baptists as a Union, it is a view that cannot entirely be refuted. This is reflected in that since Clements retirement he has been largely ignored by Baptists, despite his experience and standing ecumenically.<sup>49</sup>

In providing this short introduction to the work of Keith Clements, I am hopeful it might inspire new readers of his work and re-ignite a wider recognition that as Baptists we cannot stand apart from

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 21–22.

<sup>41</sup> Keith Clements, ‘The Larger Context: Morris West, Servant of World Ecumenism,’ in J. H. Y. Briggs and Faith Bowers (eds.), *Baptists Together* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 2000), 28–29. West was Principal of Bristol Baptist College and one of those involved, on behalf of Baptists, in the WCC report *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Payne was General Secretary of the Baptist Union and at one point one of the Presidents of the WCC.

<sup>42</sup> *Conversations Around the World 2000-2005. The Report of the International Conversations between The Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance* (Anglican Communion Office, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> ‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church. A Report of International Conversations Between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006-2010’, *American Baptist Quarterly* (Spring 2012): 28–122.

<sup>44</sup> These began in 2014 and are to be completed in 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Disappointingly there has been no serious interest, engagement, consultation, response to any of the reports mentioned above.

<sup>46</sup> See Ian Randall, *The English Baptists in the Twentieth Century* (Baptist Historical Society, 2005), 444–51, 491–96.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson is quoted in Camroux, *Ecumenism in Retreat*, 144.

<sup>48</sup> See Anthony R. Cross, ‘Service to the Ecumenical Movement: The Contribution of British Baptists’, *Baptist Quarterly* 38.3 (1999): 107–22.

<sup>49</sup> See Clements, *Look Back in Hope*, 364.

ecumenism, that the health of our way of being church requires a shared pilgrimage with others,<sup>50</sup> which Clements has been an outstanding example.

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<sup>50</sup> On this see also Steven Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* (Waco: Baylor, 2016).