TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF BAPTIST THEOLOGY

Stephen R. Holmes
Univeristy of St. Andrews

What do we mean when we say 'Baptist theology'? Let me attempt a typology, with examples drawn from the last couple of generations of British Baptist scholars, and with some annotations. I do not do this to make normative judgements—all of the forms of work (and every one of the specific examples) I discuss below seems to me to be worthwhile and appropriate—but to offer some distinctions that might help those of us who do such work to reflect more consciously on our own practices and methodological choices. For this reason, I will suggest that various pieces of my own earlier work fit within every position in this typology. I am acutely conscious of the risk of appearing immodest in referencing things, most of them very minor, that I have written; the goal of insisting that there is no right place to land in this typology seems sufficiently important to run that risk, however.

In all that follows I use 'theology' in the broad sense, encompassing Biblical studies, church history, pastoral theology, &c., not just systematic theology. The extent to which there are differences between the subdisciplines will be a matter for discussion, but will not change my basic proposals in this paper. I also here assume the broad account of Baptist theology that I have given before, which I have termed a 'middle ground' approach: Baptists are differentiated from other Christians only by questions of ecclesiology, but our particular account of ecclesiology is surprisingly far-reaching.[1] I distinguish this from a 'minimalist' approach, which holds Baptists to be just generic evangelicals with a different practice of baptism and church government, and from a 'maximilist' approach, which holds Baptists to be the only true Christians, and so fundamentally different from all other groups. In a sense, the typology I offer here is a justification of that middle way: the reality of the earlier positions in the typology is evidence against the maximilist approach, but the possibility of the later positions suggests that the minimalist approach is inadequate.[2]

My typology might be compared with the three-point typology of Baptist theology offered by Curtis Freeman some years ago.[3] Freeman's three types might be described as 'academic theology'; 'ecclesial theology'; and 'baptist theology'. The first type is distinguished from the other two by its inattentiveness to worshipping communities, except perhaps as curious objects of investigation; the third type is distinguished

---

[1] See Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 7-8 for my first statement of this thesis, and idem., "Beyond a Bath and a Book: Baptist Theological Commitments," *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 9 (2014): 11-24, particularly pages 12-18, where I more carefully locate my approach as a 'modified minimalism' (p. 17).

[22] William John Lyons offers an interesting reflection, as an Anglican, to a volume describing the possibilities of Baptist hermeneutics, lamenting that "Baptist churchmen and women as I have encountered them are too often little more than members of panevangelical churches." Lyons, "In Appreciation of 'Reluctant' Prophets," in *The "Plainly Revealed" Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, eds. Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), 294-301, p. 297. Lyons, that is, hears Baptist scholars as assuming and expounding something akin to my 'middle ground' approach, but sees lived Baptist practice, at least in the UK, as defaulting to what I have termed a 'minimalist' approach. I am not sure that I am quite so convinced of this point as he appears to be, but I do understand it.

[3] Curtis W. Freeman, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27 (2000): 21-38. See pages 32-8 for the typology.

from the other two by elevating baptist communities to normative status. My typology is focused on methodology, rather than location, and so is just different to Freeman's; that said, my fourth and fifth types would seem necessarily to map onto his third. My first three, however, divide the territory differently from his first two, and so do not map in any interesting way.

With these remarks in place, I offer my typology of 'Baptist theology':

1. THEOLOGICAL WORK DONE BY BAPTISTS

We might start, very simply, with the claim that Baptist theology is any theological work done by Baptists. George Beasley-Murray's commentary on John;[4] John Colwell's account of the doctrine of election in Karl Barth;[5] or Helen Wordsworth's study of parish nursing,[6] are each examples of significant theological work that is 'Baptist' only in the sense of the denominational self-identification of the author. In many cases, of course, this will be entirely appropriate, in that the right methodology for the research question has no denominational entailments. If tasked with expounding the thought of a patristic theologian faithfully, or with tracing the social history of medieval religious orders, it seems unlikely, prima facie, that the research methodology will be different because one is Baptist. The tools of critical reading and the methodologies of social history at least appear to be ecumenical.[7]

Other research questions might be accepting of different answers. I will discuss below whether there is any specifically Baptist (or baptistic [8]) ways of doing biblical exegesis—I have argued in the past that there is.[9] My arguments, however, have never excluded the importance of scholarly exegesis in the classical mould; rather they have suggested a necessary extra step where the gathered community receives the exegete's work as data for its own deliberations. A Baptist exegete, then, may (if my earlier arguments have been right) stop at the point where scholarly exegesis typically stops, or may push on to reflect on an eccentric, and specifically Baptist, practice of reception. If this is right, there is no failure on the part of the Baptist exegete who works only to broad scholarly norms, and so much Baptist Biblical scholarship might well fall in this area.

---

[4] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 36 (London: Thomas Nelson, 1999[2]).
[5] John E. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1989).
[6] Helen Anne Wordsworth, *Rediscovering a Ministry of Health: Parish Nursing as a Mission of the Local Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).
[7] Qualifications here indicate that I am open to argument on these points; at present I cannot quite imagine what the argument would look like, however, so I take my point to stand until effectively challenged.
[8] Following James McClendon, and many others who have followed him, I use 'baptist' or 'baptistic' to recognise that there are a family of Christian traditions who would not own the title 'Baptist' (and in some cases—the Society of Friends, e.g.—might not agree with our practice of baptism), but who represent a similar 'believers church' perspective. See James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986). To avoid ugly repetition, every reference to 'Baptist' in this paper should be read as including the possibility of a broader baptistic grouping unless I explicitly exclude it; I will make this assumption explicit from time to time to remind the reader.
[9] Stephen R. Holmes, "Baptists and the Bible," *Baptist Quarterly* 43 (2010): 410-27; idem. "Scripture in Liturgy and Theology," in *Theologians on Scripture*, ed. Angus Paddison (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 105-18.

For Baptists seeking an academic career, or even academic recognition, early work will probably fit on this point of the typology: we need to prove to our scholarly guilds that we are competent scholars before we may operate as explicitly Baptist scholars.[10] This perhaps raises an interesting question for our denominational colleges: to what extent might the need/desire to prove academic competence to the guilds (and so to work like this, or in the next position on the typology) inhibit the production of self-consciously 'Baptist' scholarship, that fits in my fourth and fifth positions in this typology? I raise this as a question, which every Baptist college I have detailed knowledge of across the world is already wrestling with. I suspect that there is no general answer. In parts of Europe where Baptists are still suspected of being a cult, maintaining general scholarly respectability might be a crucial missional move, for example.

2. THEOLOGICAL WORK DONE BY BAPTISTS ON SUBJECTS RELATED TO BAPTIST LIFE

Second, we might consider theological work which fits all the methodological criteria in the first position above, but which addresses particular Baptist interests. Beasley-Murray's great book on *Baptism in the New Testament*;[11] Ruth Gouldbourne's historical work on the Anabaptist Casper Schwenkfeld;[12] or Paul Goodliff's analysis of the attitudes towards sacrament of contemporary BUGB ministers,[13] might each fit here. Methodologically, each study could have been done by a scholar from any denomination (or none); the pieces are rendered specifically 'Baptist' because the authors are Baptists studying things that Baptists are particularly interested in.

The most developed area of British Baptist academic work is historical; Whitley's scholarship is still taken seriously far beyond even the theological academy,[14] and in more recent times we might list (at least) David Bebbington, John Coffey, and Brian Stanley as British Baptist church historians who have attained to the highest honours in their academic discipline. In every case, an examination of their corpus, and of the doctoral studies they have supervised, will reveal many works that fit this type: serious historical scholarship, conducted according to the best standards of the discipline, which however takes as its subject matters that Baptists find particularly interesting. Stanley's bicentennial history of the Baptist Missionary

[10] I would hardly hold my own career up for emulation, but it happens that my own early work conformed to this pattern, albeit without any design on my part. I worked on a series of historical studies, of which one or two fitted into the second position in my current typology, as addressing subjects related to Baptist life, but which all could have been done by any scholar trained in historical theology. See Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999); idem. *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

[11] George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

[12] Ruth Gouldbourne, *The Flesh and the Feminine: Gender and Theology in the Writings of Casper Schwenckfeld* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006).

[13] Paul Goodliff, *Ministry, Sacrament, and Representation: Ministry and Ordination in Contemporary Baptist Theology, and the Rise of Sacramentalism* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010).

[14] Wing's *Gallery of Ghosts*, a standard publication of the MLA listing books known to have existed but lost to contemporary libraries, uses Whitley's work as a source, for example.

Society[15] is an obvious example: any historian could have done the work, but it is not a surprise that a Baptist historian in fact did.[16]

There are research subjects where the boundary between this position on the typology and the others on either side is rather blurred. A British Baptist doctoral student studying (e.g.) pacifism in the early patristic church might just be interested in the subject, or might have been convinced through interaction with Alan Kreider's work that pacifism is a Baptist, or at least baptistic, theme, and so particularly deserving of her attention. On the other side, work done here still satisfies the scholarly guilds that it is methodologically sound; if its subject depends on a private interest, that renders it slightly quirky, but by no means without scholarly norms. This distinguishes it from the next position, where work is done to promote a particular agenda, which renders it suspicious in scholarly terms.

3. THEOLOGICAL WORK DONE BY BAPTISTS ATTEMPTING TO SERVE THE NEEDS, POLEMICAL OR PASTORAL, OF THE BAPTIST DENOMINATIONS

Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament* is a difficult book to locate: is it an exegetical analysis done by a Baptist that happens to support Baptist conclusions, or is it a polemical piece, using admittedly-excellent exegetical argument to press for a conclusion that was predetermined? The distinction is rather artificial, of course (what academic study was ever totally disinterested?), but it is also the boundary between the second and third positions on my typology. In the particular case I have cited, questions of history and eminence almost certainly intrude: George Beasley-Murray established himself as a leading international NT scholar, and so his account of baptism was received with more seriousness than would have been afforded to exactly the same arguments coming from an unknown, but confessedly-Baptist, writer.

Nigel Wright entitled his study of church-state relations *Disavowing Constantine*;[17] the polemic is already visible there. This is not to denigrate his scholarship at all; the book meets any standard of scholarly excellence that I, at least, know. The scholarship is, however, directed toward an end; a confessionally Baptist theologian exploring the logic of the constantinian settlement was never going to conclude that it was simply positive. Edward Pillar's various published forays into anti-imperial readings of Paul might be read similarly: without any implied criticism of the scholarship, we know what sort of an answer a Baptist exegete is going to discover when asking about Paul's attitude to imperial claims.[18]

---

[15] Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Mission Society, 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

[16] Paul Fiddes and Rex Mason make a similar point in two contributions to Dare and Woodman, *"Plainly Revealed"*, arguing that the focus of (British) Baptist OT scholarship in the twentieth century on prophetic literature relates directly to a Baptist nonconformist heritage. See Fiddes, "Prophecy, Corporate Personality, and Suffering: Some Themes and Methods in Baptist Old Testament Scholarship," 72-94, especially pages 73-8, and Mason, "Response to Paul Fiddes," pages 95-8, especially 97-8.

[17] Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church, and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

[18] See, e.g., Edward Pillar, *Resurrection as Anti-Imperial Gospel: 1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10 in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). With far less exegetical skill than Pillar, I reached many of the same conclusions, for many of the same reasons, in my *The Politics of Christmas* (London: Theos, 2011).

This is not an unusual position in contemporary theological study; a liberationist perspective on Paul and empire is going to be even more reliably negative than a Baptist one; feminist readings of the place of women in the gospel narratives (say) will either end up dismissing Christianity, or finding a positive account of what is said—as Baptist exegete Anne Clements did in her study of the women in the Matthean genealogy.[19] In the postmodern academy, theological work, like all other work, is partial and committed; if Marxists are able to proclaim their particular understandings, as they are, Baptists should not be ashamed of doing the same. (And Marxist Baptists should flourish freely as well…)

Sometimes the polemical work will address internal questions. With several others, I was involved in writing a statement, 'The Courage to be Baptist', that sought to assert a particular position concerning questions of sexual ethics that are presently deeply controversial in British Baptist life.[20] We did not, I can report, enter into the writing of that statement wondering where our investigations would lead us; we knew the answer we wanted to propose. For all of us involved, that was on the basis of varying, but in every case substantial, amounts of scholarly work on the questions beforehand—we coalesced as a group because we agreed in important ways. No doubt some of each of our early work—probably unpublished—on questions of sexual ethics belonged to position two in my current typology—thinking about a question that was presently important to Baptists (in the UK), we played with interpretations and ideas, and began to form conclusions. Having formed conclusions, however, we each began to see the need to intervene in current UK Baptist debates with a definite end in mind. Our published statement, therefore, argued for certain positions unashamedly; it was, in that sense, polemical, and so belongs squarely in this third position.

4. THEOLOGICAL WORK DONE USING SPECIFICALLY BAPTIST (OR BAPTISTIC) THEMES ARE KEY ORGANISING CATEGORIES

If there is a binary boundary in the typology I am trying to develop, it lies between my third and fourth positions. Positions 1-3 assume the rightness of general scholarly norms, and explore what it is to be Baptist in the light of that assumption; positions four and five, by contrast, assume that the essence of being Baptist lies in challenging general scholarly norms.

The less radical way of mounting such a challenge is to accept that the modes of argument that are accepted in broader scholarly discourse are correct, but that there are themes that have been ignored that should be taken as decisive or even normative. The two most obvious examples in recent British Baptist life are peace and covenant. Peace as an organising category for theology is more associated with some of the communities we might describe as 'baptistic' rather than Baptist, of course: the historic peace churches include the Mennonites and Quakers. The rediscovery of sixteenth-century anabaptism as a potential inspiration for Baptist life post-christendom, and the personal inspiration of Alan and Eleanor Kreider and

[19] Anne Clements, *Mothers on the Margin: The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).
[20] See "The Courage to be Baptist" at www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk (last accessed 20/11/2018).

Stuart Murray-Williams, led to a great deal of interest in the peace churches as models for British Baptist life in the closing years of the twentieth century, culminating in a commitment to explore becoming a Peace Church in the 1998 BUGB document *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* (which however was never followed through). In terms of native British Baptist theology, Steve Finamore appropriated Girard in some powerful ways in both a monograph and his earlier Whitley lecture;[21] he also contributed to an edited collection exploring peace as an organising motif for Baptist theology.[22]

Paul Fiddes has used covenant as a key organising category in a number of publications, most significantly perhaps *Tracks and Traces*,[23] a collection of papers on Baptist identity; similarly, *On Being the Church,* a collaborative volume by Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anthony Cross,[24] works from an account of the calling and gathering act of the triune God to a doctrine of the church that is centred on covenant. Haymes, Gouldbourne, and Cross see the human act of covenant making as being contained within the divine covenant of salvation;[25] Fiddes is more daring. He works out hints he finds in Browne, Smyth, and Keach, with the help of an actualistic reading of Barth's doctrine of election, to suggest that the the covenant which forms a church is in some important sense the same as the covenant of salvation that God has made with humanity, and even with the 'covenant of grace'—the inner triune relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit.[26] A particular concept of covenant is proposed as an organising category for ecclesiology, soteriology, and even theology proper, the doctrine of God. (It is worth noting that this differs fundamentally from the 'federal theology' of seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy, which focused exclusively on covenant as an organising category for soteriology, although it found many resonances outward from that; Fiddes gestures to this in citing John Gill who, although a Baptist, at this point followed the Reformed and did not link the church covenant with the covenant of redemption.[27]) In being Baptist, for Fiddes, we know something decisive about covenant that causes us to construct theology differently from others.

5. THEOLOGICAL WORK DONE IN A DISTINCTIVELY BAPTIST (OR BAPTISTIC) WAY

Sean Winter's 2007 Whitley lecture, subtitled 'Biblical interpretation in covenant perspective,'[28] is clearly influenced by Fiddes here, and draws on some of the same sources; it moves, however, into the fifth category of my typology because Winter does not just use covenant as an organising category, but as a reason to

[21] Steve Finamore, *The Bible, Violence, and the End of the World: The 2001-2 Whitley Lecture* (Oxford: Whitley, 2000); idem, *God, Order, and Chaos: René Girard and the Apocalypse:* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009).
[22] Anthony Clarke, ed., *Expecting Justice but Seeing Bloodshed: Some Baptist contributions to following Jesus in a violent world* (Oxford: Whitley, 2004).
[23] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (SBHT 13) (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).
[24] Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anthony R. Cross, *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity* (SBHT 21) (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).
[25] *On Being the Church*, 206-7, with examples ranging from Gainsborough in 1606 to Westbury-on-Trim in 1946.
[26] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 21-47 & 65-82; for the final point explicitly, see page 79.
[27] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 34-5.
[28] Sean Winter, *More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenant Perspective: The 2007 Whitley Lecture* (Oxford: Whitley, 2007).

propose a distinctive methodology—here, of exegesis. He proposes, that is, that Baptists should read Scripture differently to others just because they are Baptist. The thesis statement that he arrives at asserts that "biblical interpretation in covenantal perspective should be understood as the church's active, diverse and ongoing engagement with the biblical texts."[29] This focus on the church, the gathered community, as the proper location for Biblical interpretation is one I have also explored;[30] the radical nature of the claim should not be missed: there is some significant sense, if Winter is correct, in which the local church meeting is better able to interpret Scripture than the university seminar of biblical scholars.[31]

Now, neither Winter or I wish to dismiss the work of the exegete's guild; I have argued why my proposal does not at some length in an essay;[32] Winter implies it in his statement quoted above. He is constructing a method of biblical interpretation which, as is usual in the practice of his guild, can and will be deployed alongside other methods in approaching texts. He does seem to imply a certain normativity for this method for Baptists, however: if Fiddes's account of covenant relations is correct, then this can be shown to be the best way to read the Bible—a point I would not disagree with.

Winter suggests that Baptist ecclesiology, or at least one form of it, will cause us to revise our exegetical practices; what of our theological methodology more broadly? The same, or a very similar, argument would seem to obtain: if gathered church meeting is where the mind of Christ is most clearly, or most properly, known, then theological claims should find their validation more easily in the congregation than in the academy. Paul Fiddes makes a stronger and more complex argument than this in the first chapter of his *Tracks and Traces*, predicated on the suggestion that every Christian community gives rise to its own theology.[33] He identifies several aspects of a 'Baptist experience'—the direct rule of Christ in the local church; believers' baptism; the priesthood of all believers—which he believes will necessarily shape the way Baptists do theology.

Of course, if Fiddes is right, and every Christian community gives rise to its own theology, then Baptists are not distinctive in so doing. Here we might return to the question of the relative distinctiveness of our Baptist tradition, with which I began this paper. If we assume that Baptists are no more different from (say) Presbyterians than Presbyterians are from (say) Anglicans/Episcopalians, then, although there might be a distinctively Baptist theology as Fiddes argues, it will be distinctive only in the sense of being a slightly altered version of the same basic faith. If we assume that Baptists (together with baptists) are radically different from all other Christian traditions, then we would expect the minor differences between other traditions of theology to pale by comparison with the fundamentally other theology of B/baptists. I have argued that Baptists are distinctive only in our ecclesiology, but that our different ecclesiology is surprisingly generative of radical positions. I suggest that this is also true here, with this question of theological

[29] Winter, *More Light*, 28.
[30] Holmes, "Baptists and the Bible".
[31] Helen Dare makes a similar argument in her essay "'In the Fray': Reading the Bible in Relationship," in *"Plainly Revealed,"* 230-52.
[32] See my "Scripture in Liturgy and Theology".
[33] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 3-6.

methodology in view. On this basis I suggest that our theological methodology will be surprisingly radical, but basically ecumenical. This description of course demands some filling out.

Brian Haymes has argued for four distinctive aspects of a Baptist theological method: continual re-invention; imaginative indwelling of the biblical narrative; generous pluralism; and a collegial theological task between experts and other church members.[34] This last point connects with Winter's exegetical proposals (and my suggested extension of them to theological argument more generally): Baptists believe that God is best known in the gathered worshipping community, and if we are right to believe this, then we will have a different account of how to think theologically. Here, I propose, is the point where (for those of us who are B/baptists) our ecclesiology affects our theological methodology decisively.

The conference where I first offered these thoughts was a conference for people who were doing academic work whilst serving as ministers of local churches. Most of our Baptist scholars in the UK fit this description (if by 'scholar' we mean someone with, or working towards, a doctoral degree); perhaps twenty have posts in our ministerial training colleges, and fewer than half that academic posts in mainstream universities. As a community we have sometimes mourned this; perhaps we should instead celebrate it? The reasons for mourning are obvious: our best thinkers have little time to think or read, and almost no time to write. What reasons might we find to celebrate?

Pastoral ministers, more than any others, are embedded in the life of the local worshipping community. If, on a Baptist account, theology can only be adequately done from within that context, pastoral ministers are uniquely well-placed to do theology. Even if not on top of the recent literature, they bring insights from their pastoral context that are far more important for an adequate account of the matter under discussion than any merely academic theologian or exegete can ever bring. This is not, as I have noted earlier, to denigrate or disparage the work of the theologian or exegete—that work matters—but a contextual evaluation which only pastoral ministers are capable of matters as much or more.

This reflection poses a serious challenge to those seeking to serve as Baptist theologians whilst holding academic positions—like me. We, on this account, have a responsibility—indeed, a need—to locate ourselves in the closest possible connection with a particular local worshipping community. I would suggest that, in British Baptist life (at least—but it is all I know) we in fact know this, albeit tacitly. It happens that my local church entered a period of pastoral vacancy recently; realising that I would be called on to give a bit more energy there, I resigned from a couple of national groups I served on, one ecumenical, one pan-evangelical. I had been involved in both for over a decade, and received many generous comments that, however, fell into a pattern: Anglicans and Roman Catholics expressed varying levels of amazement that someone would decide to step back from national service to focus on the local congregation; Baptists—and baptists, mostly from the new churches—assumed (as I had done) that it was the obvious thing to do. Our B/baptist scholars (they were both groups drawing together academics to advise Christian charities) understand something about the primacy of the local congregation, even if they have not articulated it.

[34] Brian Haymes, "Theology and Baptist Identity," in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Whitley, 2000), 1-5.

This, so far, is theoretical: what does the local congregation give to the would-be theologian, that is necessary for her work? This question deserves far more serious attention than I am able to give it at the end of this paper, but let me suggest two things in outline. First, drawing on Lindbeck,[35] if the speech of the worshipping community is primary theology, then deep immersion in a worshipping community is necessary for adequately debating theological questions. The B/baptist twist on this would be to insist that a particular and local community is necessary: one may not gain the needed insights from touring various churches and engaging with them, because the decisive worshipping communities for understanding faith are local covenanted congregations.

Of course, this is a claim based on a Baptist ecclesiology that might be challenged, but Baptist, and baptistic, theologians will want to assert it, and to live in conformity with it. The point is not that the faith of one Baptist church is fundamentally different from the faith of another, but that faith is lived out, and so narrated, in particular contexts, and so the best way to understand faith (as well as context) is to be profoundly attentive to, and thoroughly immersed in, one lived expression of faith. The authentically Baptist theologian will want to be utterly entwined with the life of a particular Christian community, because reflection on that life will be absolutely key for her academic work, whether she foregrounds that or not.

It is important to note here that this commitment to the local community in Baptist theology is never a reason to be detached from wider structures. The instinct to associate runs very deep in Baptist life, and every local Baptist community will be in covenant relationships with other congregations, in Associations, Connexions, Unions, and the like. The Baptist theologian's responsibility to her local community may sometimes involve recalling these broader relationships and insisting that they are a part of the identity of the local community, as I shall explore in my second point below.

One important part of that will be hearing, indwelling, and then exploring, the tacit systematic connections of a community. How does a doctrine function in this church's life and faith? Which doctrines are instinctively associated with each other, which reached for when solace and assurance is needed, which celebrated as precious distinctives? This will always be a contextual question—in seventeenth-century England, for example, to speak of 'covenant' was already to engage in political theology, and controversial political theology at that; this is far less true today, where 'covenant' might speak primarily of a counter-cultural witness to lasting intentional community in an individualistic culture. The doctrine of the Trinity, even, will function very differently in the discourse of a twenty-first century church acutely aware of its plural context than it did for a Baptist community in the seventeenth century (and will function differently in different contexts today, being a crucial mark of orthodoxy for minority Baptist communities suspected of being cults by established state churches, for example). Even the systematic task of theology, then, will be decisively affected by deep immersion in a local community, for the Baptist theologian.

Second, the Baptist theologian will be conscious of the different cultural possibilities, and so able to bring prophetic critique to her community. Alert to the political charge the word 'covenant' once had, she

[35] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

will be able to ask if losing that has meant losing something important, if speaking of covenant should go hand-in-hand with speaking of peace, and should both support, and be supported by, anti-imperial readings of Paul (for example). In bringing such critique she will never disown or stand against her community—to do so would be unBaptist, at least in the way I have been developing the concept here—rather she will recognise that the church is gathered and covenanted to follow the ways of God, 'known and to be made known', and that the calling of each member is 'to walk together and watch over each other', and so will see that challenge and critique is intrinsic to faithful membership of the community.

6. THE THEOLOGICAL LIFE OF THE BAPTIST THEOLOGIAN

How, then, shall we live? I have explored what Baptist theology might look like—responsible to scholarly norms, but willing to be eccentric and challenging in its baptistic responsibility to the life of the local worshipping community (and the wider networks that entails). I have suggested that there is a sense in which the professional academic is handicapped by this, and the pastor-theologian privileged; such comments are theoretical, and might well be regarded as idealistic. Whatever benefits close inclusion in the life of the local community brings, they are far outweighed, it may be argued, by the privileges of a university post, including both access to resources and time to read and write.

There is some truth in this. There is certainly something important about access to resources (both financial and academic; we might hope that the present drive to open access publishing will help with the latter, although it is in grave danger of exacerbating the former—the move is towards the author paying the cost of publishing, so material will be free to access for the reader, which is in grave danger of further damaging the ability of those without institutional backing to publish academic work). Assumptions about generous amounts of time to read and write, however, can be rather romanticized given the reality of the modern university; this privilege is better narrated in parallel terms to the privilege of the pastor-theologian already identified—it is rooted in the benefits of inhabiting a particular community, in this case a scholarly community. It is not so much limitless time to read as an individual that is on offer, as the chance to be part of a community where most things will have been read, and so can be accessed and assessed through conversation.

The Baptist theologian will flourish, I have argued, only if he is deeply immersed in both ecclesial and academic communities. Our churches, at least at best, provide opportunity for the academic theologian to be immersed in ecclesial community, whether any given theologian takes advantage of these opportunities or not. How might we arrange for our pastor-theologians to be immersed in academic community? In some places, it will be naturally possible (in my home institution in St Andrews, for example, we offer an honorary lectureship to any doctorally-educated minister in the town routinely, inviting them to be part of our community), but these contexts will be the exceptions. If we (as a Baptist community) believe in the importance of our pastor-theologians, we will want to find ways of creating academic community in which they can be embedded and flourish; if my characterization of the benefits of being embedded in academic

community is correct, then the most important part of this will be constructing opportunities for conversation, for overhearing and sharing expertise.