

# *What Baptists Believe*

**MADE  
NEW**

# Contents

Introduction .....	1
The Bible .....	2
The Gathered Church .....	4
Believer's Baptism .....	6
Independence of the Local Church .....	8
Congregational Church Government ...	10
The Ministry .....	12
Church Membership .....	14
Freedom .....	16
Mission.....	18

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

First published by Stirling Baptist Church, 2019

Re-published with the permission of Professor David Bebbington and Stirling Baptist Church



**CENTRAL**†  
BAPTIST CHURCH DUNDEE

Central Baptist Church | 8 Ward Road | Dundee DD1 1LX  
Central Baptist Church Office | 9a Ward Road | Dundee DD1 1LP

☎ : 01382 201255 | 🌐 : [www.centraldundee.com](http://www.centraldundee.com)

✉ : [enquiries@centraldundee.com](mailto:enquiries@centraldundee.com)

Central Baptist Church is a Scottish Charity, SC000311

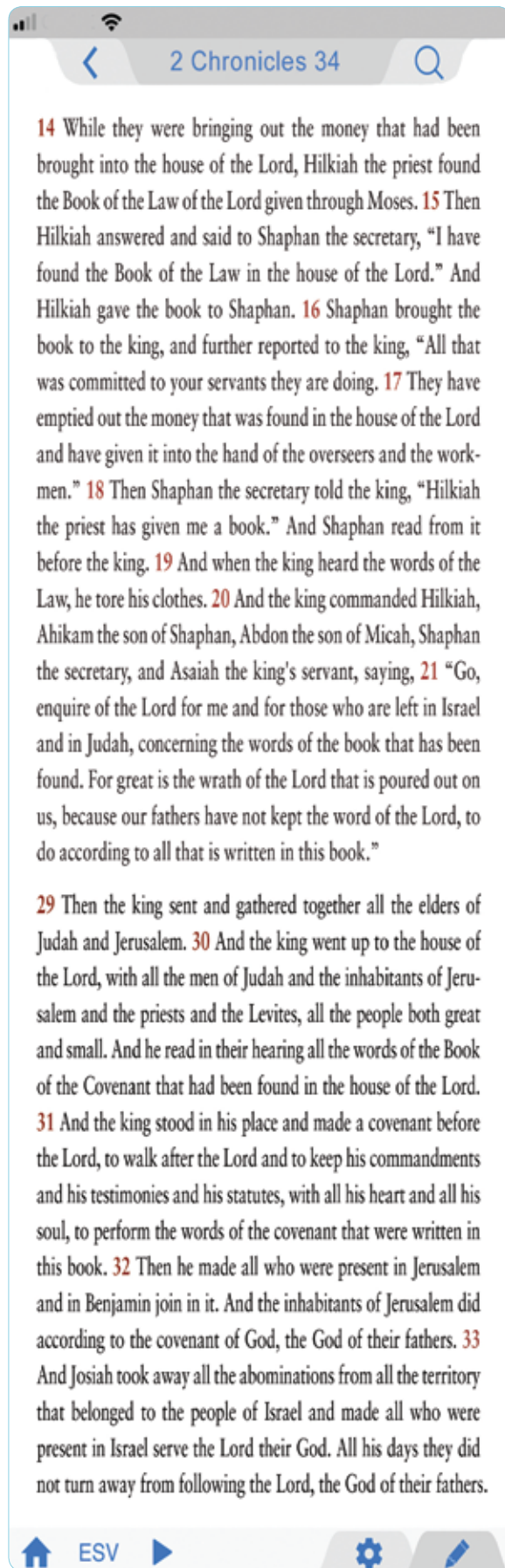
# Introduction

Baptists have a number of distinguishing convictions. In many cases, however, the Baptist view is shared by certain other Christians. The attitude of Baptists to the Bible is common to most Protestants, their churchmanship is equally that of the Congregationalists and even their beliefs about baptism are also held by Christian Brethren, Pentecostals and some others. But the combination of convictions offered for discussion in this booklet is unique. It is the combination that makes Baptists Baptists.

This is not a set of Bible studies. Baptist convictions cannot be found set out systematically in certain passages of the Bible. If they were available in that form all Christendom would be Baptist. Rather, they are based on sections scattered about the Bible. Mention is often made of particular verses or groups of verses, and users of this booklet may like to refer to them. A whole passage of the Bible is nevertheless specified at the beginning of each study.

A few comments are made in order to bring out its significance for the subject under scrutiny. The biblical extract by itself is rarely sufficient to demonstrate the validity of a Baptist principle, but it is hoped that the passage will point in that direction. As the first study suggests, Baptist convictions are worthless if they are not founded on the Bible.

Questions of church order are of much greater importance than many Evangelical Christians have supposed them to be. This booklet may help Baptists – and, of course, other Christian people – to consider some of the reasons for Baptist convictions. It is written in the belief that they are true.



# The Bible

## 2 Chronicles 34 : 14-21, 29-33

During repairs to the temple in about 623 BC, the Book of the Law of God was rediscovered. There followed a transformation in national life. Realising that failure to obey God's commands was sinful, King Josiah ensured that his people heard the law and agreed to abide by it. Judah submitted to its authority. Christians possess a fuller version of the same book in the Bible. It contains not only the law of Moses but also the rest of the Old Testament, together with the New Testament. All believers of whatever denomination recognise that it has authority over their lives.

Baptists, however, would wish to go further than many other Christians. Like others, they know that supreme authority belongs to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18). Like others, they believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world today, especially in the church, guiding the followers of Jesus into the truth (John 16:13). Like others they have often seen the value of knowledge of the Christian tradition in the past, giving a perspective on truth beyond the confines of their own generation. Like others they have included in their ranks people who have understood the importance of reason as a gift of God. But with remarkable consistency Baptists have declared that the Bible is the primary channel through which the authority of Jesus is known and possible guidance by the Spirit is tested. The Bible stands above both tradition and reason.

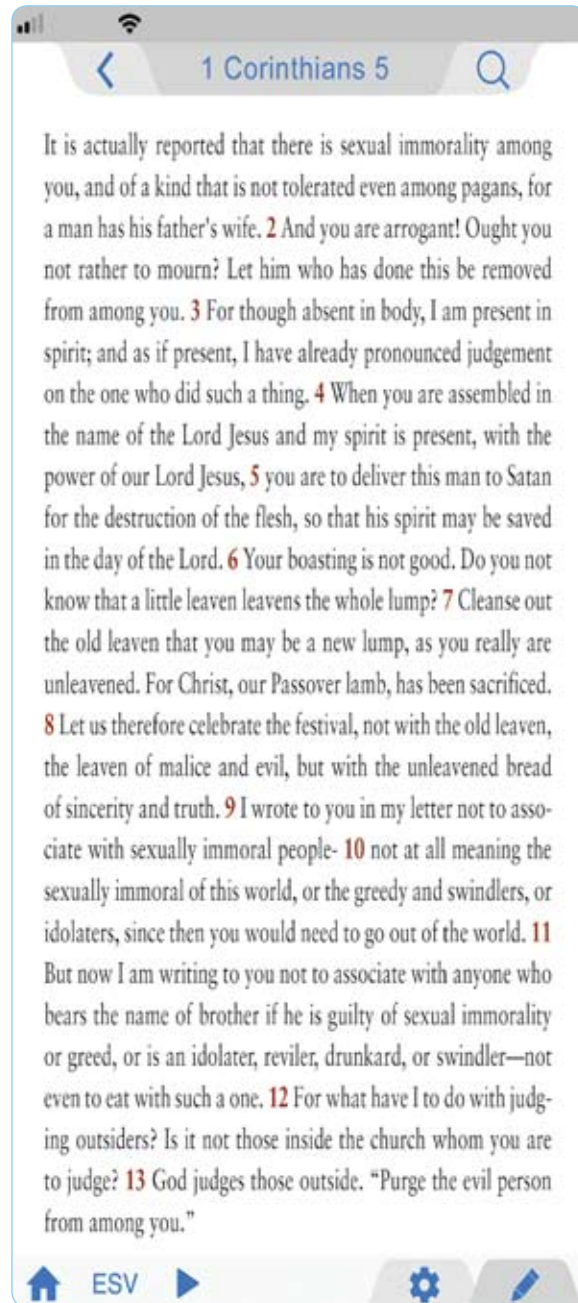
Confidence in the supremacy of the Bible as a court of appeal in the Christian faith has grown in recent years. Those who raised Christian tradition to a position of parity with the scriptures have been reconsidering. Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics have increasingly acknowledged that study of the Bible must take precedence over acceptance of what is customary. Again, biblical scholarship has growingly felt its task to be the explanation of the message of scripture, not discussion of its alleged disharmonies. Reason has not tried to dissect the Bible, but humbly to expound it.

Baptists have other reasons for according great respect to the Bible. It is, after all, the only detailed sourcebook for information about Jesus and his background. Partly for that reason Baptists hold that the Bible is uniquely inspired as a revelation of God's message to humanity. The writers of the New Testament were extremely close to their subject, both in time and sympathy. They, like Jesus himself, considered the Old Testament to be authoritative. So, Baptists conclude, the whole Bible must be treated as possessing supreme authority for Christian faith and practice.

Although they want to make due allowance for the different cultural context in which the Bible was written, Baptists know they cannot pick and choose which bits to apply, subordinating the text to their own whims. Nor do they feel at liberty to apply biblical teaching only to the content of their belief and not also to how they order their church life. The Bible has to be decisive in all spheres.

# The Gathered Church

## 1 Corinthians 5



Sexual immorality had taken place within the Christian community at Corinth. The response of the church, according to Paul, should not be to turn a blind eye or even to make persistent attempts to persuade sinners to change their ways. The church was to expel the immoral brother. Likewise it was to have nothing to do with any member who was flagrantly 'greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler'. The purity of the church was Paul's paramount concern. The Christian community was to include only those whose practice was no denial of their profession.

In harmony with Paul's teaching here, Baptists would insist that none but real Christians should form the church. Only those who have responded in faith to the grace of God should be admitted to membership. Only those who continue to show evidence of true conversion should remain. In the New Testament churches are nothing other than believing communities, separate from the world, 'colonies of heaven'. Christians have an obligation to join a church, for they must not omit meeting together (Hebrews 10:25). The New Testament knows nothing of isolated believers. Rather, they must regularly assemble for worship with others. Together they form a 'gathered church', gathered out of the world as a Christian community.

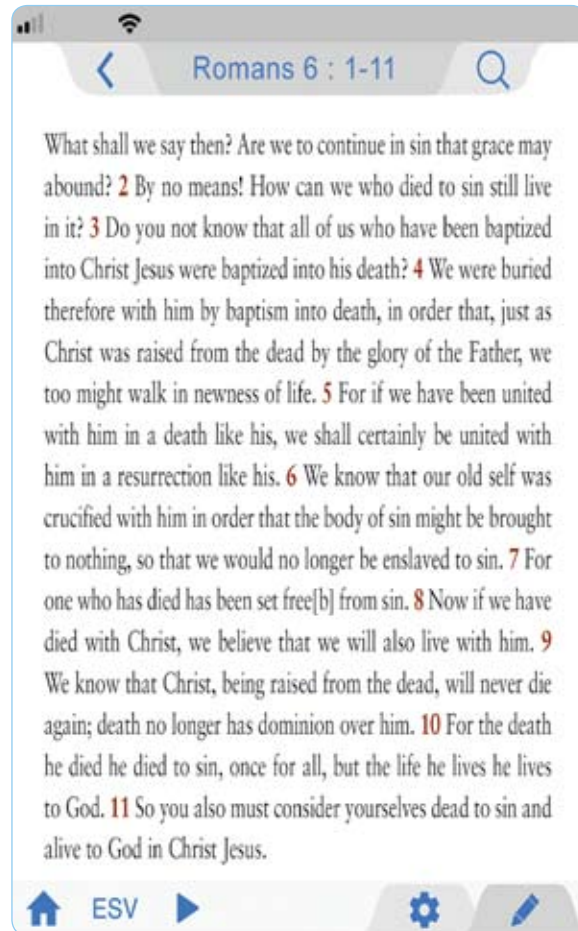
In consequence Baptists reject any notion that all the people in a given area should be offered the privilege of church membership. Only those who can bear witness to God changing their lives are eligible. It may be objected that human beings cannot find out for certain who possesses saving faith in Jesus. This is knowledge reserved to himself by God. But Baptists do not claim to be anticipating the last judgement. They simply look, in accordance with scriptural directions, for a credible profession. If individuals' assertion of faith is supported by fruit in their life, they are worthy of church membership.

Again, the objection is sometimes heard that, according to Jesus, weeds and wheat should be allowed to grow together. Only at harvest will they be separated (Matthew 13 : 24.30). Hence, it is argued, non-Christians, represented by the weeds, should be tolerated as members of the church. But that is to misconstrue the parable. Jesus declares explicitly that the field is 'the world' (Matthew 13 : 38), not the church. God in his forbearance allows the wicked to coexist with 'the sons of the kingdom'. But there is no permission here for the wicked to remain members of the Christian community.

On the contrary, the visible church should approximate to the church invisible. Therefore church discipline should be exercised. It is important both to be kind to the sinner and to avoid complacency on the part of those exercising discipline (Galatians 6:1). But serious lapses - whether moral failures, doctrinal vagaries or simple non-attendance - do need to be taken up. If necessary, in the last resort, a member may have to be expelled. Frequently it is the most effective way of challenging people to face the error of their ways and so change them. It also ensures that the church continues to be the body (as it was put in the 17th century) of 'visible saints'.

# Believer's Baptism

Romans 6 : 1-11



Paul challenges his readers to realise the significance of the baptism each of them had experienced. When they were plunged under the water, he explains, they were identifying themselves with Jesus in his death. It was a burial of their old sinful ways. Hence sin must not continue in their lives. Only if Paul is referring to a person making a deliberate choice to be baptised does the argument make sense. And only if baptism entailed being submerged does the imagery of baptism carry force.

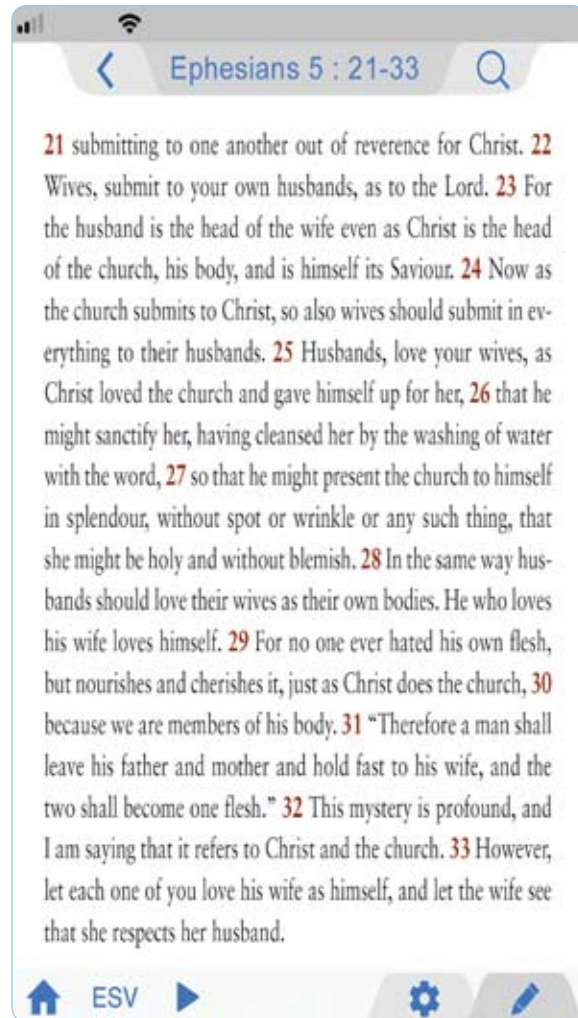
Baptists hold that baptism should be administered only to those with conscious faith. That is why their practiced is called 'believer's baptism'. In the New Testament the act of baptism always takes place after the coming of faith. It is, in fact, the mark of those who wish to respond to the gospel, itself an embodiment of faith. It is associated with God's forgiveness of our sins, union with Jesus Christ and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is also the rite of admission to the church, Christian initiation. Since church membership is to be restricted to those who have personally accepted the Lordship of Jesus Christ, so too is baptism.

Consequently baptism should not be administered to Infants. The baptism of infants, we can confidently declare, grew up in post-biblical times. There is no evidence that the households described in the New Testament as receiving baptism included infants: on the contrary, from accounts of their uniformly adult behaviour it would seem that they did not (e.g. Acts 11:14 with Acts 10:44). Defenders of infant baptism sometimes suggest that, since circumcision was provided for babies, baptism (as its N.T. equivalent) should be administered to them too. If the same group of people that was circumcised under the Old Testament should now be baptised, however, then the rite should be restricted to **male** infants. Circumcision clearly is not an analogy for baptism in all respects. Nevertheless it does not follow that baptism is for adults alone. Young people who show evidence of real faith in Jesus possess the one qualification. Baptists practise believer's baptism, not adult baptism.

The mode of baptism matters as well as its subjects. The Greek word itself means 'immerse', not 'dip' or 'sprinkle'. Only if a candidate is submerged does the rite have its full significance. Total immersion testifies to total commitment, total purification, total identification with Jesus in his death. Symbols have more power than we normally suppose, and this one has particular visual impact. Furthermore, in obedience to the instructions in Matthew's gospel (28:19), the act is performed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through baptism the believers enlist in the service of God in his fullness. They join the army of God the Holy Trinity.

# Independence of the Local Church

## *Ephesians 5 : 21-33*



In writing about the relationship of husband and wife, Paul found it natural to use the bond between Jesus Christ and his church as an illustration. He wanted to provide a picture of a close, loving relationship in which one side was prepared to sacrifice himself and the other side responded with devoted loyalty. So the attitude of the church to its Lord sprang to mind. His primary reference is to the church of all places and ages, the whole company of the redeemed. Yet his assumptions apply equally to the local gathered community, the way in which the cosmic church becomes actual on earth. Jesus Christ, he points out, is the exclusive head of the church.

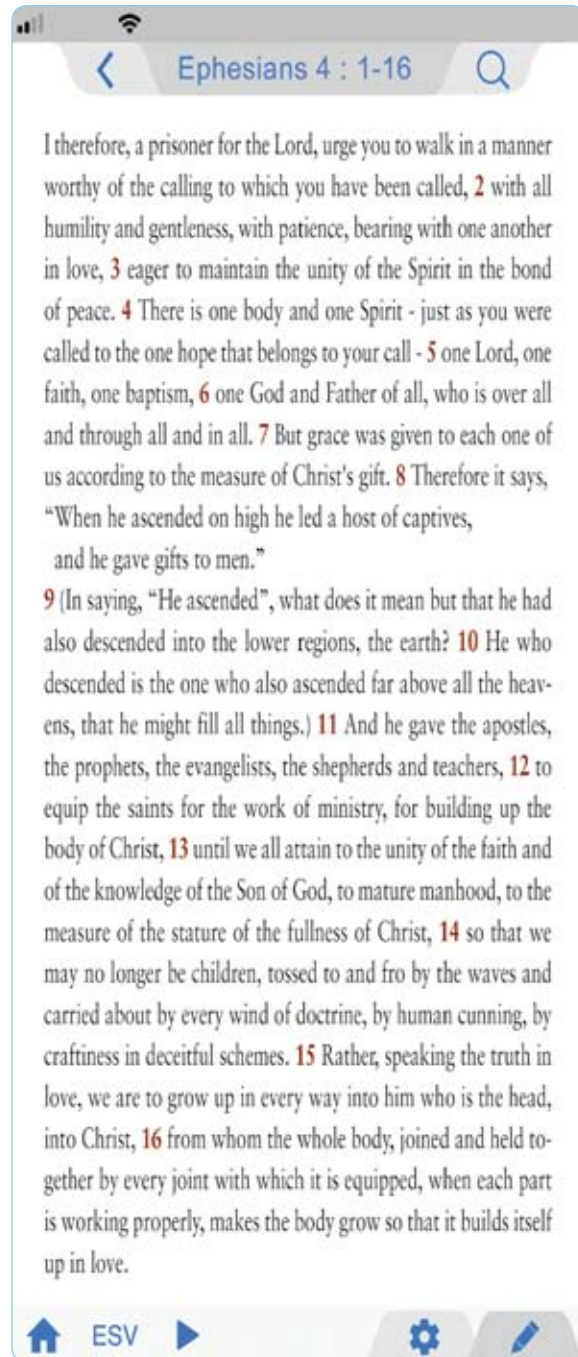
Baptists take this as their standing point in their understanding of the role of the gathered community of the baptised. Each local church can enjoy the full presence of Christ (Matthew 18:20) and so is complete in itself. For any external ecclesiastical body to claim authority over it is to infringe the crown rights of the Redeemer. Baptists agree with Episcopalians that oversight of the church is vested in no individual such as the pope. They agree with Presbyterians that the very idea of the superior authority of one minister over another is alien to the spirit of the gospel. And they agree with Congregationalists that no bureaucracy external to the gathered community has directive power. Only Jesus Christ possesses that.

In modern times, as a matter of practical convenience Baptists have created unions to provide services for them. Officers of a Baptist Union can provide inspiration, commission literature and speak on behalf of the fellowship of Baptist churches. But they cannot usurp any control over the churches of the union. Neither General Secretary nor Superintendent possesses the right of oversight. A Baptist church entering a union remains entirely free to order its own affairs in the light of its understanding of the will of Christ. The assembly of the Baptist Union is a consultative body for decisions on matters of joint concern, not a church court. Its decisions can never override those of a church meeting. There is therefore no such thing as 'the Baptist Church'. There are independent Baptist churches.

Yet there is another side to the coin. If New Testament churches did not submit to external authority, they did voluntarily combine for mutual support. They clubbed together to support other Christians in financial need (Acts 11:29, 1 Corinthians 16:1), consulted each other (Acts 15:3) and had other links (Col 4:13, 15f). Although independent, they were interdependent. Any proud self-sufficiency would have been a denial of the gospel they proclaimed. Consequently Baptist churches have normally seen it as an obligation to combine in associations and unions for each other's good. More recently they have commonly extended the principle to supporting bodies like councils of churches that permit cooperation between churches of different denominations. Isolation is no part of the Christian faith.

# Congregational Church Government

## *Ephesians 4 : 1-16*



Both the diversity and unity of the church are brought out in this passage from Ephesians. In writing to a local Christian community, Paul dwells on the variety of gifts entrusted by the ascended Jesus to its members for the benefit of the whole. Each member has received the ability to contribute to the welfare of the whole (Ephesians 4:7). There is elsewhere in the New Testament an emphasis on the competence of members in general to instruct each other (Romans 15:14), their capacity to act together in important decisions (Acts 15:22) and, as we have seen, their duty to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21). The resulting picture of the local church is one of a united body marked by spiritual equality among its members.

Baptists therefore uphold the privilege and duty of each member to contribute to church government. Some would deny that all should take part, pointing out that administration is a gift of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:28). This is of course true: not all Christians are fitted to manage affairs on a day-to-day basis. Yet all Christians do participate in the mind of Christ, and, together with other members, can help discern his will for the church. Alongside the priesthood of all believers in the New Testament there is the kingship of all believers (Rev 1:6). Each Christian possesses a share in the royal authority of Christ the King. Each is therefore fitted to join in church government.

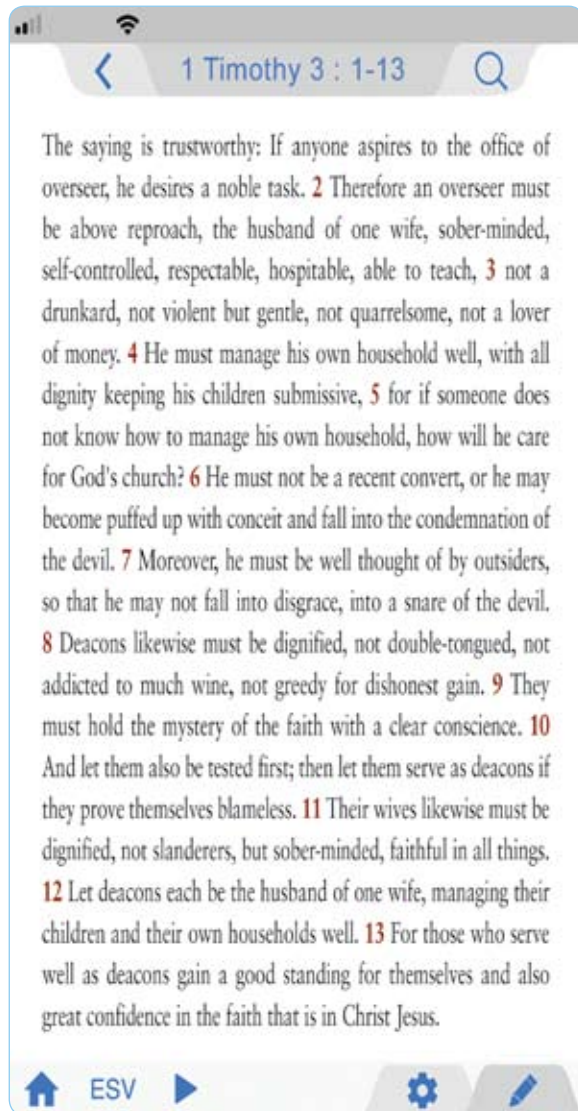
Members assemble for decision-making in the church meeting. There they share responsibility for choosing officers of the church (Acts 6:3-6), admitting and disciplining members (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) and commissioning missionaries (Acts 13:1-3). It is such weighty matters as these that should concern them rather than the nuts and bolts of administration. Church meeting can encourage the gifts of its members, offer guidance to those seeking it and give scope for learning from one another about proper Christian attitudes. It is, as the words of Jesus suggest (Mt 18:17), the supreme authority of the church under Jesus Christ its head.

Church meeting is not a democracy but a theocracy. It is not there to take majority decisions but to discover the will of God. Accordingly it is not (as too often it is called) a 'business meeting', but rather a prayer meeting where business happens to be done. Voting is not essential, for decisions may be taken by consensus. After discussion, a leader can formulate an agreement; any member is free to express dissent, in which case further discussion leads to a fresh formulation; and eventually a position in which all are prepared to acquiesce is reached. It is a method that preserves 'the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). Whatever the method, however, believers share together in church government. As much as worship it is a sphere for the expression of the wholeness of the body of Christ.



# The Ministry

## 1 Timothy 3 : 1-13



In the pastoral letters of the New Testament there is a great deal of teaching about the proper conduct of church life. This passage of 1 Timothy concentrates on the qualifications of church officers, overseers and deacons (NIV) or leaders and helpers (GNB). Both groups are to be above reproach.

It is not clear from this passage how the responsibilities of the two groups differed, but if, as is likely, the seven appointed to ensure fair shares of food for all widows are identified as deacons (Acts 6:1-6), then their work fell in the area of administration and relief. Elders were overseers: the two words are equivalent (Acts 20:28 with Acts 20:17). They were to be shepherds of the flock, and some were to preach (1 Tim 5:17). So local churches were to have two types of officers, overseers and deacons.

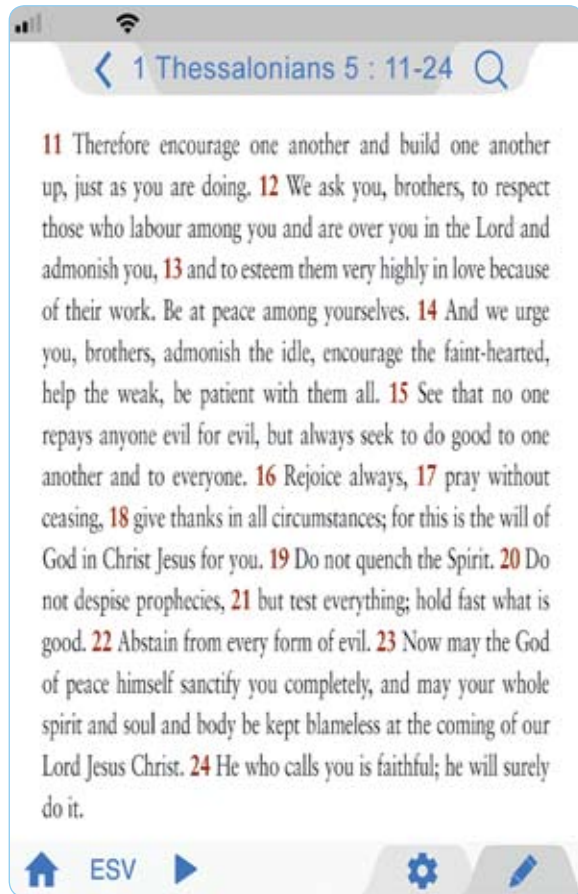
Baptists have the same two types of officer in their churches. There is sometimes confusion caused by names. Ministers or pastors can be thought of as a separate category. In fact, however, with their shepherding and preaching responsibilities ministers are nothing other than elders/overseers. Up to the eighteenth century their normal title was 'elder'. They do not differ in status from those actually designated elders. It makes no difference that ministers work full-time. They need not do so, and at all stages of Baptist history, including the present, many have not done so. What matters is that those charged with oversight, whether called ministers or elders, should receive the respect and support of the church (1 Thessalonians 5:12f).

Leaders should nevertheless avoid the risk of usurping authority that is not properly theirs. Appointed by the local church, they remain responsible to it. Domineering figures do exist (3 John 9), and it is within the duties of the church to admonish a leader (Colossians 4:17). Those charged with leadership must remember the example of Jesus, who came to serve by giving his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45). The very words 'minister' and 'deacon' both mean 'servant'. Deacons in particular need to recall that they are subordinate to the collective voice of the church. As deacons, whether individually or collectively, they have no independent powers. The common term 'deacons court' is therefore a misnomer. The 'deacons' have no jurisdiction. Any authority they possess is by delegation from the church meeting. Their joy should be to serve.

Ministry, though concentrated in elders and deacons, remains the task of the whole church. Elders and deacons are fundamentally facilitators, enabling their fellow-members to use their gifts to the full. Service for one another should be an expression of the love of God implanted in our hearts (1 John 3:17)

# Church Membership

## 1 Thessalonians 5 : 11-24



The church at Thessalonica as a whole received instructions 'to encourage each other and build each other up' (1 Thessalonians 5:11). They had leaders who were over them in the Lord, but that did not detract from the responsibility of ordinary members of the church to warn, encourage, help and exercise patience. Faithful Christian practice included a concern for corporate welfare as well as prayer and other features of a devout life. Churchmanship was part and parcel of church life.

The corporate dimension of Christianity has received increasing stress in recent years. Partly as a result of realising the importance of community solidarity in Third World countries, Evangelicals have perceived with new eyes the centrality of togetherness in the New Testament. Baptists should never have forgotten this truth. Believer's baptism, among many other things, is an oath of loyalty – which is the meaning of the word 'sacrament'. Loyalty is pledged to Jesus Christ and to the particular church that is being entered, the body of Christ in the locality. The baptised believer is dedicated to live (as the Christian Endeavour motto puts it) 'for Christ and the church'.

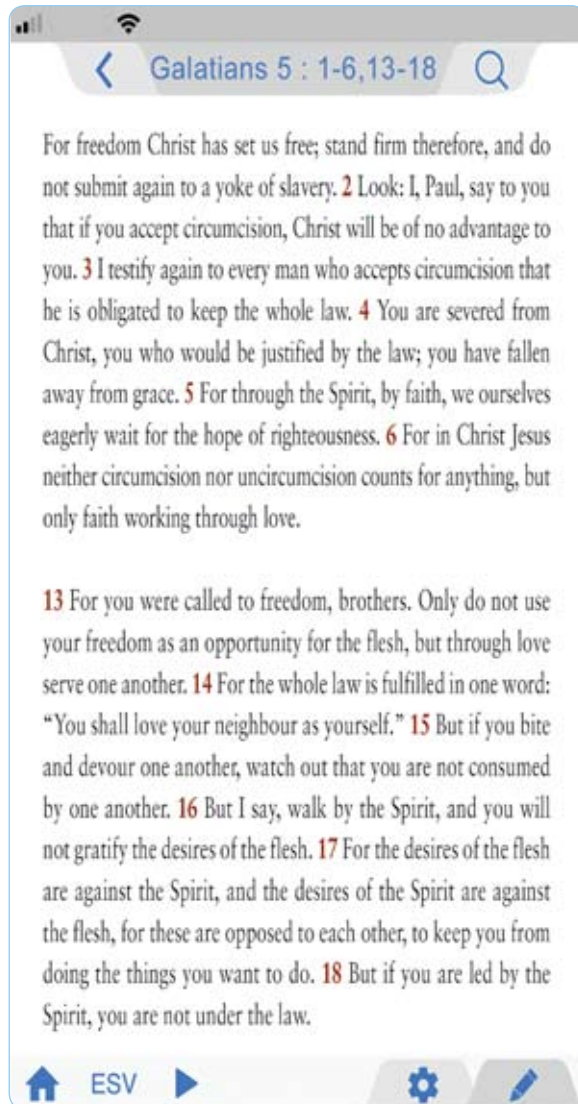
Part of the church member's obligations rests upon the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9). Each member shares in the priestly task of the whole church. Priests represent their people in the presence of God. Accordingly, each church member has a responsibility (and delight) of regular corporate worship. The members join in offering a sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15). Another responsibility, partly fulfilled through public worship, is intercession. Prayer for others is a primary duty of the church (1Tim 2:1).

A member will also wish to attend the service which, above all others, expresses the togetherness of the church – the communion. Division at the table or unconcern for one another is a denial of the meaning of the feast (1 Corinthians 11:18- 21). The Lord's Supper is a regular opportunity to reaffirm loyalty to Jesus Christ and his church.

Membership means much else in less formal contexts. It entails stirring each other up to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10.24). It entails lending what fellow church-members need. It entails simple friendship. Members will consider what time and money should be given to their church. They will also expect fellowmembers to suggest tasks for which their aptitudes may fit them. But they will not confine their thoughts about serving the church to the narrowly ecclesiastical sphere. Jesus may equip people for a career or for public service, and in either role they may be expressing loyalty to their church. A church draws people in, but it also sends people out. Membership should be a guarantee of prayerful interest in any Christian calling by the whole church.

# Freedom

## Galatians 5 : 1-6, 13-18



The way in which we are made right with God, Paul insists, is by faith. If we expect God to accept us on the grounds of observance of the law, as the Galatians would do if they were circumcised, we overturn the basis on which we have already been received. We are therefore free. Three ways of life are contrasted in this chapter. The way of the sinful nature, the flesh, is non-Christian. The way of the Spirit is the Christian way. That means that the third way, that of law, is also to be rejected (Gal 5:18). Jesus Christ has set us free.

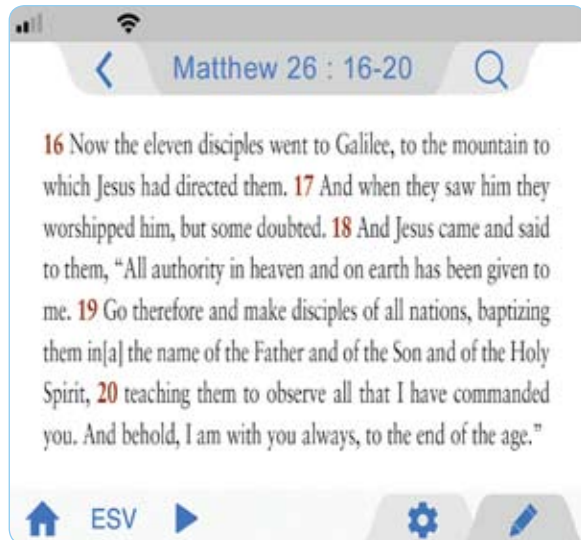
Baptists have worked out something of what is involved in upholding freedom. The social leader of the first Baptist church, Thomas Helwys, wrote a book, *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) claiming full liberty for religious practice. It was a very early statement of the case for freedom of conscience. In the United States Roger Williams, a Baptist among the early colonists, likewise called for religious liberty. There should be no attempt by church or state to impose conformity to a particular creed. If there was an attempt to impose a false religion, persecution of true believers would follow. But equally if there was an attempt to impose Christian truth, people would conform for the wrong reasons and so be inoculated against the real faith. So freedom was recognised as implicit in the gospel.

Freedom must be maintained against unjustified authority today. The state has its claims upon us: we should, for example, pay our taxes. But the state should not step beyond its sphere by attempting to regulate belief. When it does so, the state becomes a marauding beast like one of those depicted in Revelation 13. In some countries that has been everyday experience. Many Baptists in Russia believed that their churches could be registered by the state, but those who did not suffer acute harassment or worse. In other countries a privileged church has harried Christians of other denominations. Romanian Baptists probably suffered more at the hands of the Orthodox Church than at the hands of the communist state. So in giving thanks for our own freedom, we should remember those who do not enjoy it in the modern world.

Further, we need to resist attempts to abridge Christian freedom on our own doorstep. There are risks that Evangelical Christians may be regarded by some officials in central or local government as peculiar fanatics and so treated less than fairly. And there are Christians who claim that obedience is the great virtue of the hour, not freedom. Leaders in the church, they hold, are to receive unquestionable submission. That is not the case. Leaders, as we have seen, are to be respected, but are subject to correction by their fellow believers in the local church. No leader has the right to infringe the freedom of other members by directing them, for example, in their plans for marriage. There is a sacred area of freedom in which, for all the benefit of guidance from Christian friends, believers are answerable only to their Lord.

# Mission

## Matthew 28 : 16-20



The Great Commission stands as the climax of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is about to ascend to the Father, his work on earth complete. His last words are a command to go. Followers of Jesus are not to stand still but are to reach out to those around them. Possessing the authority of their ascended Lord, they are to make disciples, baptise them and teach them. Christians are entrusted with the task of planting the gospel firmly in all nations. Consequently, as it has been put, the church is mission. The aim of spreading the gospel, though happily shared with many Christians of other denominations, is a matter of strong conviction amongst Baptists. The Declarations of Principle of the Baptist Union, after affirming the headship of Jesus Christ over each church and the nature of Christian baptism, has only one further clause. It declares 'that it is the duty of every disciple to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.' Baptists are constitutionally bound to the responsibility of evangelism.

The first section William Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792), argues that the Great Commission is a lasting command. From that belief sprang the Baptist Missionary Society, the earliest British foreign missionary organisation. Since that time Baptists have been among the most consistently Evangelical of Christian denominations.

The theological rooting of their practice of mission is the prophethood of all believers. Just as they share in Jesus' work as priest and king, so they participate in his prophetic ministry. They have to declare what God has done for humanity through Jesus Christ. That is not to say that all Christians are evangelists. On the contrary, the ascended Lord has equipped only some to be evangelists (Ephesians 4:11). We might expect about ten percent of the church to have the gift. But one hundred per cent of a church can be witnesses. Those who had been scattered by the earliest persecution of the church naturally told the message of Jesus (Acts 11:19f). Equally naturally, we can imitate them.

Mission involves more than testimony, however. It means supporting words with deeds. Christian people should look for chances of following their Lord in care for the whole person, bodies and minds as well as souls. This need not be a diversion from evangelism, but may be a powerful support for it. And Christians need above all to be present in the society around them, to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13- 16). What we are can be more eloquent than words or deeds. In whatever sphere we move, whether work or home, our primary role is to live out the new life that Jesus has brought us, to be what we are in Christ. This is his purpose in sending us into the world.