

## **‘Baptist identity, strap lines, and Jesus’**

A personal theological reflection on the ongoing conversation<sup>1</sup>

Stuart Blythe

The Baptist Union of Scotland as a Union of Churches ‘represented’ by a central leadership structure is in a time of transition. A period of reflections has been stimulated by changes in leadership, financial constraints, a desire to re-connect congregations with congregations in shared activity, and an ongoing situation of numerical decline. This reflection is part of this process which the national leadership hopes will lead to action and the revitalisation of BUS.

At present, emerging from a residential Council Meeting held in May 2010 two ideas sit side by side. On the one hand, there is a call for a renewed emphasis on Baptist Identity. On the other hand is the suggestion that the future strategy of the Union requires ‘building missional relationships’. This statement, although perhaps not initially offered as such, has been picked up as a potential ‘strap line’ to describe the Union’s activity and life together in facing the future. When aired, among various parties, the ideas associated with the strap line have received a welcome reception showing resonance with these ideas.

Some conversation at various levels has taken place to try and identify and articulate the connections between Baptist Identity and ‘building missional relationships’. There is no evidence that as yet this has been largely successful either at an ideological or a semantic level. There is nothing particularly Baptist about the strap line on its own. In turn the phrase ‘building Baptist missional relationships’ or some variation does not really work.

Perhaps no resolution is required and both ideas can live in peaceful co-existence. On the other hand, there is the possibility there is not simply ‘a tension’ here but real ‘tensions’. Some may argue that ‘building missional relationships’ is just a strap line and that the Baptist Identity ‘hobby horse’ is outdated and unhelpful to the spread of the gospel. We need to get on with mission as the great imperative and the strap line emphasises this. Few beyond the walls of Baptist churches know the name ‘Baptist’ let alone care about what it stands for. Others, however, argue that if we are not united by more than ‘doing mission’ there is no particular reason why we need to do such uniting with other Baptist Churches or indeed have any sort of ‘Union’ called ‘Baptist’. Other churches and groups such as EA offer alternative, perhaps better, and maybe cheaper alternatives. If Baptist does not matter why bother with the ‘Baptist Union’ at all? Perhaps a further cautionary perspective is that to some outside of the conversation both approaches represents the ruminations of an organisation engaged in the very kind of moribund discussion that render it totally irrelevant to them in the first place! Here the voice from the margins perhaps needs to be heeded.

---

<sup>1</sup> I invited a number of people to comment on this paper. Some of the comments are reflected in the text as it now stands. Others I include at the end (C) with my own brief responses (R) in the spirit of ongoing dialogue and conversation. To stimulate such conversation was the original intent of this paper. Six people, 3 of whom are ministers in local churches offered comments.

In this paper I offer a personal response. In so doing, I do not approach this subject as a disinterested observer but as a participant: a positioned participant. I have been asked to present matters on Baptist Identity to and on behalf of the Baptist Union of Scotland's leadership. I am a Baptist minister, a member of a Baptist Church, and I teach Baptist Identity at the Scottish Baptist College. This may stereotype me as a 'traditional Baptist' hankering after a lost 'denominational' past. On the contrary my 'Baptist' commitment is ideologically 'baptist'. In other words I approach Baptist Identity through the perspective of 'anabaptist' or 'neo-anabaptist' convictions. As a consequence I believe that non-violence and peace making are central to the gospel and that aspiring to such should be integral to discipleship. This is not a position shared either personally or formally by many in the Baptist Union of Scotland. Furthermore, I am deeply suspicious of all institutions sacred or secular. Consequently, I am quite iconoclast. For this reason, I would concur with those who feel that if the word 'Baptist' in 'Baptist Union' does not have meaningful content, then the necessity for such a Union is deeply questionable. I have, therefore, no interest on holding onto the past. This notwithstanding, I do believe that there is within the 'Baptist' way of being the Church the potential to make a particular contribution to the wider evangelical and ecumenical Church: a contribution without which the Christian Church in general would be the poorer.

Following on from the above, it is because I understand that the discussion about the strap line is part of a bigger and more substantive conversation about the nature of Baptist Identity, 'who we are' and 'where we are going', that I am neither satisfied with the strap line 'building missional relationships' as it presently stands or the solution of somehow making sure that the word 'Baptist' is in one way or another articulated alongside of it. At stake is not just a new motto to replace the present one of 'growing healthy churches' but the issue of how we understand the way in which to revitalise our churches in Union together. For this task, it seems to me neither emphasising 'mission' more nor speaking 'Baptist' louder will deliver what is desired.

In pursuing an alternative approach and with the suggestion of the value of social movement theories I came across the interesting suggestion that revitalising an organisation requires a rediscovery of the organisations 'inner voice' with an 'innovative interpretation of this identity in a changed world'.<sup>2</sup> This can be defined as a going back to 'source'. This in turn can be related to the use of the word 'radical' in terms of going back to 'roots'. In this respect it seems to me that the inner voice and source of that which is Baptist is neither 'Baptist' nor 'mission' but Jesus Christ as borne witness to in the Scriptures, crucified and risen.

Baptists of course have no monopoly on the confessed Lordship of Jesus Christ. Recognising this Lordship is a confessed belief of all expressions of orthodox Christianity. What brings distinctiveness to a grouping, however, is not simply the 'content' of the beliefs held but the particular function and place that beliefs are given in the practice of that organisation.<sup>3</sup> On this matter, regardless of what others do or do

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Re Jesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Sydney: Strand, 2009), 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> An example here would be the fact 'conversation' is part of various aspects of life and organisations but it does not have the same formal function, significance, or role in each. So that to say all value conversation may actually tell us little. Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 24-24.

not claim Scottish Baptists at least in public declarations claim that their first ‘principle’ is to live under the authority of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures’ and interpreted through community in the power of the Holy Spirit. To put this more dynamically, the Baptist way of being the Church, Baptist Identity, involves a continual returning to the source that is Jesus Christ revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

To be sure, returning to the source and listening to the ‘inner voice’ which is Jesus is likely to result in mission. In turn, it is an approach that will shape the content, nature, and methods of any such mission. On this issue contemporary popular writers on the ‘missional church’ recognise the need to ‘*Re-Jesus*’.<sup>4</sup>

To claim that returning to Jesus Christ as source will lead to mission is not, however, the primary reason for doing so. The primary reason is that this is the way of ‘faithful discipleship’. Likewise ‘faithfulness’ takes priority over ‘effectiveness’ in relation to such issues as cultural appeal, attractiveness, and numerical growth. This is not to deny that we desire our ‘missional’ activity to be effective but to put this category in its right place. Furthermore, in an eschatological perspective to walk in the way of faithfulness is to walk in the way of the Kingdom come and coming and is thus surely to be walking in the ‘effective’ way?

Reflecting on all of this my response would be that any strap line which seeks to be Baptist regardless of whatever else it says should make some reference to the person of Jesus Christ. This is not a novel idea. Prior to ‘growing healthy churches’ the ‘kerygmatic’ strap line was ‘Jesus Christ the only Hope’.

One objection to this suggestion may be that such ‘kerygmatic’ statements about Jesus Christ are no longer appropriate for our present context. This begs the question of ‘who’ the ‘strap line’ is for, an issue that several involved in the conversation have highlighted. If it is intended for the members of our congregations is this not precisely the kind of ‘thick’ and descriptive language that we want and need to express who we are?

On the other hand, however, it could be argued that the strap line also needs to be accessible to people outside of the church for who such language may be problematic.

In response to this several things can be said:

First, to suggest that we leave Jesus out of our public statements in order to be more effective in mission is surely like suggesting that we don’t have a cross in our churches because it may get in the way of the gospel! To continue on this theme if our language at times alienates it serves the missional task of reminding the world that it is not the church.<sup>5</sup>

Second, missiologists recognise the wide appeal of Jesus Christ. For many outside of the church their problem is not with Jesus but with the church. Non church people expect Christian people to believe in Jesus. Frequently the issue is the way in which

---

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly one of the quotes that opens the book by Frost and Hirsch called *Re Jesus* is from the C16 anabaptist Hans Denck, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* (London: SCM Press, 2010), for the influence on this comment, 258-259.

the church does not match up to the character of Jesus not that the church talks and preaches about him.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, if we are going to do the business of translating the language and ideas of 'Jesus Christ' into other more 'understandable language' we need to make sure that this language can carry the 'weight' of the meaning that the significance of the person of Jesus Christ has. I am not sure that we have this language in the strap line proposal as it stands on itself.

In the light of the above, therefore, it seems to me that if a strap line is to try and communicate our Baptist identity as well as our missional task, and if the ideas so communicated are to represent where we are going in order to see the 'renewal' of our Union, it needs to name and communicate the centrality of Jesus Christ to our lives.

The above suggestion is not, however, without its problems. To use the name of Jesus Christ in the Union's 'strap line' say as in the form 'Under the Rule of Christ', or 'Under Christ our Only Head' can create a sort of 'self-authorising' of the way things are because we claim that what we are doing is what Christ wants. Such uses are therefore dangerous if not regarded as aspirational and if in practice structures, behaviours, and values are not constantly subjected to the Lordship of Jesus Christ which is always greater than the organisation that claims to live under it!

It is here that perhaps we get to grips with the truly 'revolutionary' theme of going back to the inner voice which is Jesus Christ as that which from within the organisation is constantly allowed to challenge and change the way things. On this issue I think John D. Caputo adds some important ideas about Jesus Christ as the 'deconstructive' inner 'Truth' of Christianity:

In a deconstruction, things are made to tremble by their own inner impulse, by a force that will give them no rest, that keeps forcing itself to the surface, forcing itself out, making the thing restless. Deconstruction is organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain. Nobody has to come along and 'deconstruct' things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own inner truth. In a deconstruction, the 'other' is the one who tells the truth on the 'same'; the other is the truth of the same, the truth that has been repressed and suppressed, omitted and marginalised, or sometimes just plain murdered, like Jesus himself, which is why Johannes Baptist Metz speaks of the 'dangerous memory' of the suffering of Jesus and why I describe deconstruction as a hermeneutics of the kingdom of God.

The 'danger' Metz describes is the deconstructive force. As soon as the 'other' tells the truth, as soon as the truth is out, then the beliefs or the practices, the texts, or institutions, that have been entrusted with the truth begin to tremble! Then they have to reconfigure, reorganise, regroup, reassemble in order to come to the grips with their inner tendencies – or repress them all the more mightily.<sup>7</sup>

For me, therefore, the inner voice that offers renewal to BUS is the living person of Jesus Christ as borne witness to in the Scriptures. This I think would be better named

---

<sup>6</sup> Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not The Church* (Michigan: Zoderwan, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Baker Academic: Grand rapids, 2007), 29.

than absent in statements including a strap line unless it becomes a 'forgotten' rather than 'dangerous' memory. More important, however, than the question of a strap line or not is the reality of the truly frightening renewal and hope (as in the resurrection accounts of Mark's Gospel) that come from the living Jesus Christ as our behaviours, values, words, and actions are rigorously and lovingly subjected to his will and way.