

CONSULTATION ON BAPTIST MINISTERIAL ACCREDITATION RULES AND SEXUALITY

Question:

Should the Baptist Ministerial Recognition (MinRec) Rules be amended to ensure those Accredited Ministers in a same-sex civil partnership/ equal marriage no longer be subject to 'gross misconduct' and so lose their Ministerial Accreditation?

Just to be clear:

- This only affects a handful of Baptist Ministers and their 'affirming'/ supportive congregations.
- This is NOT asking if the Union should require all churches to change their approach to marriage.
- This is NOT asking if we as Chester Road Baptist should register to marry same-sex couples. In any case, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 'triple lock' says, before same-sex weddings can happen: a) the presiding Minister/ Registrar must have consented; *plus*, b) the place of worship must have consented (for us, a Church Meeting decision), *plus*, c) the denomination must have consented

Background

Baptists Together (Baptist Union) does not give a view on the rights/ wrongs of equal/ same-sex marriage. That's because, as Baptists, each church has liberty to decide for itself. The majority of Baptist churches maintain a 'traditional' definition of marriage as being only between a man and a woman. Others are 'affirming' of same-sex couples, with a small (but growing) number registered/ registering for equal marriage.

Currently, MinRec rules state that any Nationally Accredited Baptist Minister in an equal/ same-sex marriage or Civil Partnership, unless celibate, has committed 'gross misconduct' and so is removed from the Register of Nationally Accredited Ministers ('the Accredited List'). Specifically, Appendix 3, Section 4.3 includes:

"Sexual Misconduct which brings the church and ministry into disrepute. NB This specifically includes sexual intercourse and other genital sexual activity outside of marriage (as defined exclusively as between a man and a woman)."

Baptist Council has been asked to amend this rule. Should the bracketed section be retained or removed? Given the diversity and strength of opinions expressed, Baptist Council are consulting churches and Accredited Ministers (closes 30th Nov 2023). The final decision is for Baptist Council (March 2024).

The case for amending the rule (i.e. saying 'yes' to the rule amendment):

What, on the surface looks at first like a question about equal/ same sex marriage, is really a question about *Baptist identity and ecclesiology*. It's not so much, should equal/ same-sex marriage be accepted or rejected? (some agree/ others disagree); rather it's, should each Baptist church still have liberty to determine its own approach, or should there be a national approach that *all* must follow?

Chester Road Baptist Church is, principally, a *Christian* church. We celebrate being part of the universal Church, the body of Christ, alongside our Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal, RCGG etc brothers & sisters. What unites us, is not our *uniformity* of all being/ believing the same (because we don't!); our *unity* is found in us all being 'in Christ' – *Jesus* is our unity. If I am a child of God and you are a child of God, then, whatever our differences, we are family - brothers & sisters in Christ!

We are also a *Baptist* church. That means, we celebrate being part of a family of 2,000+ Baptist churches in England & Wales. But, again, what unites us, is not the *uniformity* derived from all Baptist churches being/ believing the same (because we don't!); our *unity* is found in us all being 'in Christ' – *Jesus*, the Head of the Church, is our unity. No matter what our differences, we remain family – Baptists Together!

Whilst Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, Pentecostals, RCGG etc, are top-down/ centrally governed, Baptists are 'bottom up' or 'congregational' in governance. Each Baptist congregation has freedom to determine, and is responsible for, its own path, ethos, theology, finances, appointments etc. Though legally independent, we prefer to think of ourselves as being *inter*-dependent. We are family!

This is enshrined in our historic Baptist Declaration of Principle, which states:

1. *That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, **and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.***

2. *That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'.*
3. *That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.*

This local liberty explains why there is such diversity within our Baptist family. For example:

- Some Baptist churches are 'Conservative Evangelical'; at the other end, some are 'liberal', with many others, like us, somewhere in between.
- Some Baptist congregations are charismatic in worship and 'speak in tongues'; at the other end, some are 'cessationist' (believing all gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased with the first Apostles), again, with many others, like us, somewhere in between.
- Some are Reformed (believing, for example, Christ only died to save those God had pre-selected to follow Him, pre-selecting the rest for Hell), whereas others believe God gives free-will to all to choose whether or not to follow Christ.
- Some Baptist churches believe only men can be Ministers, others that God calls women too.
- Some Baptist congregations will remarry those who are divorced, others won't.

There is almost no end to the diversity within our Baptist family. Though at times hard work, we think it's also our strength. It promotes local empowerment, innovation, challenge, and protects against the status quo. It gives liberty for each church to be and do what it believes God has given for them.

There are a range of views on equal/same-sex marriage within our Baptist family. For many Baptist churches, this liberty and Holy Spirit guidance leads them to say, marriage can only be between a man and a woman. With a high view of marriage and because of how they interpret the Bible, they believe same-sex sexual relationships are sin. For them, it's about God's righteousness and holiness.

For a smaller but *growing* number of Baptist churches, this liberty and Holy Spirit guidance, leads them to affirm same-sex couples, and some to register to conduct same-sex/ equal marriages. Again, also with a high view of marriage and *because* of how they interpret the Bible - *not* despite it - (see our *Deeper* session ChesterRoadBaptist.org.uk/Deeper), they 'affirm' same-sex couples. For them, it's about God's Creation, justice, and consenting, monogamous, loving relationships. The sin is in the exclusion and oppression.

Similarly, each Baptist church has liberty to call/ appoint whoever they choose as their Minister. It's not a regional or national decision.

Currently, if an Accredited Minister is in a civil partnership or equal marriage, unless they are celibate, it is treated as 'gross misconduct' (with removal from the Accredited List). This creates an anomaly for the small (but growing) number of Baptist churches that, in liberty, are registered for equal marriage: in effect, the Baptist Union says, churches that want to marry same-sex couples can do so, but their Accredited Ministers conducting those weddings can't themselves be in an equal marriage. 'Affirming' Baptist churches are denied liberty to appoint an Accredited Minister - though they could still appoint someone not accredited (unless their Trust Deed prohibits this, as some do.)

If MinRec rules are amended to correct this anomaly, those 'affirming' churches that do feel led by the Holy Spirit to call an Accredited Minister in an equal marriage/ civil partnership, would then have liberty to do so.

Amending MinRec rules would not change anything for Baptist churches and Accredited Ministers that, in liberty, say marriage can only be between a man and a woman. They would continue to have liberty to only call heterosexual Ministers and to only marry heterosexual couples.

Therefore, even those churches and Ministers who disagree with equal marriage can *and should* still support the MinRec rules amendment because, as Baptist family, we recognise each local Baptist church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws, as per our Declaration of Principle. Family members don't all have to agree on everything to remain family.

Baptist identity and belonging, steered by our Declaration of Principle, has enabled us as a Baptist family to cope with diverse theology and practice for 150+ years. To now withhold liberty for this one issue would seem inconsistent. Why *this* issue? For those who see equal marriage as 'sin', why *this* 'sin', but not others?

The UK population is increasingly supportive of LGBTQ+ rights (even more so by younger generations) and can struggle to comprehend the Church's perceived negative attitude/ practices. It feels like we're on the wrong side of history. Amending the rule would remove this barrier to mission.

Some argue opposing the MinRec rule change is a 'first order' principle. It's worth knowing this model:

First-order beliefs are *absolutes*. They are the non-negotiables of Christianity; without them there is no Christianity. They're what ALL Christians believe Baptists, Anglicans, Catholics, Pentecostals...

- Belief in the existence of God;
- Trinity. One God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit;
- Incarnation, saving death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ etc...

Second-order beliefs are *convictions*. They describe what we and other Christians like us think important - though other Christians may think differently to us. For example, they identify us as:

- Baptist e.g. believer's baptism; congregational governance; separation of Church and State...
- Anglican e.g. baptising of babies, Priest as mediator between God & people, State Church...
- Pentecostals e.g. speaking in tongues as evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit...

Third-order beliefs are *opinions*. Matters of difference between or within our congregations that needn't divide us. Not all Baptist churches take the same stance/ approach on every issue (far from it). It's inevitable, even OK, that not everyone in the same congregation will think the same as everyone else on every issue.

Fourth-order is more about *questions* – unsettled issues we're all still wrestling with.

Using the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th Order hierarchy, equal marriage seems more like a 3rd Order matter, akin to how Paul says in Romans 14 we should handle 'disputable or debatable matters'. (Catch-up talk: [16/10/2022](#))

Yes, the Accredited List is a *national* register of those who we, collectively as Baptists, commend to all our churches, and who are committed to 'walking together'. But we already accept the Accredited List contains wide variation in Ministers' situations, theology and practice e.g. it includes Ministers who are divorced and those who believe divorce is a sin. It's for each local church to exercise its liberty in deciding who it calls.

There are, of course, some limits beyond which even this liberty does not apply. For example, if a church switched to another religion or wilfully pursued illegal practice. Who decides? History and our Baptist way tell us the majority is not always right. Sometimes, what were once marginal voices on the edge of orthodoxy, have now become mainstream e.g. campaign to abolish slavery, women's justice...

In this debate, some are calling for the Baptist Union to maintain the historic prohibition on Accredited Ministers being in an equal/ same-sex marriage/ Civil Partnership, and that this should be applied to all churches, whatever their stance on equal/ same-sex marriage. Others are saying, yes, we accept many churches won't, but for those who are 'affirming', can *they* be allowed to appoint an Accredited Minister who is in a same-sex marriage/ Civil Partnership. Given the diversity and strength of views, it's highly improbable and undesirable to impose one view/ approach on all 2,000+ Baptist churches. The good news is, we are Baptists! In liberty, we walk together as family, with all our diversity.

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