

SOMETHING IS DYING AND

SOMETHING IS NOT YET BORN

by Alan Donaldson

Baptists are encouraged to return to their roots and explore what it truly means to dwell in Christ as we navigate these disorientating times.

That's the message from Alan Donaldson, the European Baptist Federation General Secretary.

Here is an edited transcript of Alan's Sunday morning sermon at the 2022 Baptist Assembly

As I look around the Church in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East I find myself repeating the phrase *'something is dying and something is not yet born.'*

Everything is being questioned. It is so disorientating. Everything feels so different. Inflation is back for the first time in a generation. War is back in Europe for the first time in a generation. Congregational volunteering is being reported at levels way below what was previously imagined. Many churches are still

operating with congregations significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Young people's ministries seem to have been disproportionately affected.

'Something is dying and something is not yet born.'

How will we navigate these disorienting times? That is the key question I am asking in my ministry at the moment. As the Northumbria Community so succinctly asks 'How then shall we live?'

I invite you to explore with me not an answer to the question, but a direction of travel. And I want to lead you to explore the riches of scripture and the riches of our roots as Baptists.

Making your home in Jesus: John 15: 1-8

This is one of the great metaphors of the New Testament. It is a metaphor of connection, of truth, of hopefulness – and it's a metaphor introduced by Jesus at a time of disorientation for his disciples. We find it in John 15.

If you flick back to chapters 13 and 14 you will pick up the context of disorientation. John has been revealing Jesus as the true Word, the living God, the Saviour. In sign after sign the disciples have witnessed a triumphant victorious Lord. Water into wine, the blind see, Lazarus is raised from the dead and the crowds cry out "Hosanna!". But now there is talk of betrayal, denial, death and confusion. Thomas says "we haven't got a clue what you are talking about, Jesus. Where are you going and how are we going to get there?"

"I do not have much time left to talk to you," he replies, before painting this picture of the garden with its vine and gardener. He tells them they are the pruned branches on the vine, destined to be fruitful. So with the warning of denial ringing in their ears, and the disorientation of his death and departure still to come, Jesus tells his disciples they will be fruitful – if they remain in the vine. If they 'abide in him.'

John 15 is all about where you make your home as a Christian. Jesus says to his disciples “abide in me” or “make your home in me.” In times of uncertainty, insecurity, disorientation – the message is “dwell in me, the light of the world, the bread of life, the resurrection and the way, the truth and the life.”

This is a key identity statement. We are in Christ. Paul uses the phrase all over the place, ‘To God’s holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.’ Romans 8:1-17 is full of the affirmation that there is no condemnation for those who are ‘in Christ Jesus.’

Being in Christ is our identity.

Abiding in Christ - the example of Ukrainian Baptists

In the face of unspeakable evil and the most awful disorientation in their homeland, Ukrainian Baptists returned to their roots and abided in Christ. With bombs, shells and mortars

landing around them, they have sought refuge in church basements and simultaneously sought the presence of God. It’s been central to their response to war: abiding in Christ’s presence by reading scripture together, finding reasons for thanksgiving together, praying together, entering the discipline of gathering together to eat bread and drink wine, baptising new believers. It is here in connection with one another they testify to experiencing the presence of God in the midst of great conflict.

They have received and appreciated the love and joy of Christ by gathering together. They have then daily left the safety of these basement churches to serve their communities. Ukrainian Baptists travelled from Lviv to Kyiv to deliver aid; they attempted to gain access to Mariupol; they walked the frail and elderly from the basements to buses in Irpin amidst shelling, and some have lost their lives rescuing the vulnerable.

The whole people of God have participated in the mission of God. Out of the security of dwelling in Christ, out of the abundance of being found in Christ, they have entered the insecurity of a war zone, and poured out their lives in service and sacrifice.

Our Baptist roots of gathering in small, deep communities

I fear we are losing this fundamental Baptist emphasis of two or three gathering together in Christ’s name, of prioritising dwelling with Christ in community with others.

It has been under attack for so long, and the pandemic has only amplified it. On the one hand the individualisation of our world, which tells us we should be self-sufficient, separates us. And on the other, the attractational model of church that tells us success is measured by the size of the crowd, separates us from deep community.



General Secretary Lynn Green prays for Alan Donaldson ahead of his Baptist Assembly address



I want to encourage you in times of disorientation to go back to our Baptist roots rather than our recent traditions, and to consider what our forefathers of centuries past discovered about practising 'being in Christ'.

Our Baptist roots as a believers' church draw us naturally into communal, intergenerational discernment and discipleship. Baptist beginnings involved people leaving churches where it was OK to be anonymous in the crowd, to form communities that shared life together as exemplified in the relational union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not simply a word and Spirit network but a Christ-rooted, integral, indigenous, organic, adaptive word and Spirit movement. Discerning together the path of faithfulness and maturity.

We have deep roots that, when creatively explored, can help us build our home in Christ and equip us for the future. Peter Barber, the former minister of

Upton Vale Baptist Church and a previous General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Scotland, used to say that "the Baptist time has not yet come". I believe that time is now. Baptist churches should be ready and able to pivot in a time of global uncertainty because in their very roots is this commitment to encountering the risen Christ in and through one another as we build our home together in Christ.

Our way of faith is simple at its root. Connect with Christ, who connects us with each other, and through witness connects us with the rest of the world. It is the trappings of our traditions, often borrowed from other churches or developed for different times and cultures, that have made it complicated and cumbersome.

As you go, you grow

Nigel Wright in his book *New Baptists, New Agenda* describes Baptists at their roots as activists. Because we live in his life and love, we can serve in our lives

and love. Will we go and invite others to make their home in him? Because if we dwell in Jesus we will want to show others the way. The calling here is to take on the family resemblance in mission as an act of witness.

It is in truly going into this world - its beauty and its pain, its suffering and hope, its loss of identity and search for identity, its self-destruction and creativity, its brokenness and healing, its shame and honour, its hopelessness and hopefulness, its disorientation and reorientation - that we grasp with greater depth the love, the protection, the security, the peace, the wholeness, the joy and hope that we receive as we abide in him.

'Going' is our classroom of discipleship. As you go you grow. Ukrainians don't grow inside the church basement listening to the shelling. It is in the going that Ukrainians discover reasons for thanksgiving, discover reasons for hope, understand how deep

the Father's love and joy is and explore the scriptures with fresh questions, passion and insight.

The fruit of going on the mission of God while abiding in the vine is two-fold; primarily you will be changed – and at times others will come to faith.

Today in the Global South we are seeing millions come to faith in disciple-making movements. The recent estimate is that there are 77 million believers whose leaders see their role being to release the 77 million into mission from day one of their discipleship. Movements that envisage every believer as a missionary in line with our own Declaration of Principle, which says: '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.'

Imagine equipping, enabling and releasing - not a couple of thousand ministers in a generation, but a million disciples all willing and able to disciple others to faith in Christ, and to teach them how

to abide in him. These models are slowly arriving in the UK: they are experimenting with them in Yorkshire (see p.47), but it strikes me they fit our roots as Baptists and this era of disorientation. Therefore they require amplification as a potential future model for Baptist churches in the UK. They are a freshly imagined embodiment of our Declaration of Principle to accompany, challenge or even succeed our inherited models for church life.

Conclusion

These last few years have been tough. And no one really knows exactly what lies ahead for us. *'Something is dying and something is not yet born.'*

How can we navigate these years?

I believe we need to explore what it truly means to abide in Christ. To experiment with new ways of being the Church deeply connected to Christ, to one another and to our roots as a Baptist people. To take time to dig into our roots and creatively

apply them today. To participate in the life, love, joy and peace of God and to know the security of his household that enables us to go out and reveal his light and his glory.



Alan Donaldson is General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation. This is an edited transcript of his Sunday morning address at the Baptist Assembly earlier this year.

You can access his sermon on Youtube at baptist.org.uk/ba22sunday

