

Reading Backward by Looking Forward: Baptists and the Ordination of Women

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1. Introduction

The Baptist Church does not exist. This must be clearly understood in any discussion on Baptist practice, polity, and theology. Local Baptist churches exist. They may, and often do, choose to associate together for mutual support and to achieve things that they could not do as well on their own, for example theological education, community services, and cross-cultural mission. When local Baptist churches associate together, they form 'Unions' or 'Conventions'. In sociological terms, these Unions are rightly called denominations, with appointed leaders and associated infrastructure, but the ecclesiology of these churches does not change—they remain 'free churches'.¹ The South Australian Baptist Union (SABU) is one such union of churches; it is not *the* Baptist Church of South Australia. At no point does the local church lose its autonomy, its right to self-rule (under Christ).

Local Baptist churches discuss issues of theology and polity at Assembly, at which the various churches are represented and which acts as the governing body of the SABU. On the basis of these discussions, Assembly sets policies for the SABU and its ministries. Ordination to pastoral leadership is an area that the SABU member churches have agreed is an area of associational responsibility; that is, the SABU ordains at the direction of, and on behalf of, the local churches.² Local Baptist churches meeting in Assembly have agreed that gender is not an issue with respect to ordination, and this is the policy that governs the practice of SABU. However, local churches are

1. See below.

2. This is true for other Baptist Unions in Australia, but it is not the case for all Baptist Unions. Some Baptist churches ordain at the local level, and the association of Baptist churches to which they belong agree to mutually recognise these ordinations.

under no constitutional obligation to accept what the other local churches agree to in Assembly. Each local church is free to call to their positions of pastoral leadership whomever they believe God has chosen for them. Historical practice reveals that very rarely do local Baptist churches believe that God would choose for them a pastoral leader who is female. This explains why, while the South Australian Baptist Union agreed to ordain women to the ministry of pastoral leadership in 1974, there have only been three such ordinations, and in 2005 there is only one ordained female pastor employed by a local Baptist church in South Australia.

This freedom afforded to each local church means that it is not possible for anyone to say with precision 'what Baptists believe' about the ordination of women (or, any other issue debated generally among Evangelical Christians).³ We have no creed, we have no confession, and we have no *magisterium*.

What follows in this article, therefore, is my understanding of what Baptists believe about the ordination of women.⁴ I am a representative Baptist, but I am not a representative of Baptists. My opinions have been moulded by Baptist churches and by theological education in non-Baptist colleges. I am currently employed by the SABU as Principal of Burleigh College, a college begun in 1952 for the training of Baptist Men for the Ordained Ministry (note the capitals), which now educates Christian men and women for a wide variety of Christian service and leadership, including preparation for ordination to the ministry of pastoral leadership.

2. The Baptist theological ethos

Baptists are committed to a 'free church' ecclesiology.⁵ Miroslav Volf argues that the free church is defined by the assertion, 'we—the people

3. A list of the fourteen major topics of debate within Evangelical Theology (with a brief discussion) can be found in R Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).
4. At times I will clearly stray into presenting what I think Baptists *should* believe. This, I am afraid, cannot be helped!
5. M Volf compares and contrasts the Free Church tradition with the Catholic and Orthodox in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

of God assembled in this particular place—are the church'. This assertion is not without its faults or limitations, but it does capture the Baptist vision of a local church as the body of Jesus Christ answerable to no one but its Lord. John Smyth (c 1565–1612), the first Baptist, expressed it this way, 'We say the Church or two or three faithful people Separated from the world and joyned together in a true covenant, have both Christ, the covenant, & promises, & the ministerial power of Christ given to them'.⁶ Smyth puts the emphasis upon a covenanted community. Contemporary Baptists have tended to exchange this for a focus upon individual liberty of conscience. In this they have moved away from their theological heritage, but there is no understanding contemporary Baptists if one does not see how they have moved from a free church to a free conscience. This tends to mean that Baptist churches are slow to change. It is neither the mind of its leaders nor the bylaws of its organising documents that need to be changed but the minds of its many members. Charles W Dewesse writes for an American *Baptist History and Heritage Society*,

Put simply, every individual is responsible only to God in matters of conscience—not to the state, not to the church, not to creedal statements, not to pastors, not to seminary presidents, not to denominational leaders, not even to one another. True faith is voluntary.⁷

Baptists share many beliefs and practices despite the plurality of voices among Christians who attend Baptist churches and the historical variety among Baptist churches in issues of polity such as baptism and membership. Anyone who has had occasion to worship with or dialogue with Baptists from around Australia or from around the world will surely have noticed this.⁸ Baptists can generally be expected to be Evangelicals. Evangelicalism is, of course, a much-disputed term. In Baptist circles it tends to indicate someone who is committed to conversionism: 'the belief that lives need to be changed'; activism: 'the expression of the gospel in effort'; biblicism: the Scriptures are seen as 'the supreme authority for faith, the primary

6. Cited in Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 10.

7. <http://www.baptisthistory.org/pamphlets/freedom.htm>, 21 March 2005.

8. The Baptist World Alliance, of which the Baptist Union of Australia is a member, includes national unions and conventions from 120 countries.

source for shaping their theology and nurturing their spiritual growth'; and crucicentrism: an 'emphasis on the doctrine of the cross as the focus of the gospel and the fulcrum of a theological system'.⁹ This commitment to Scripture as the 'supreme authority' and 'primary source', together with our emphasis upon personal liberty in interpreting Scripture, means that individual Baptist churches believe in their own competence to read the Scriptures in order to determine God's plan for their church.

The SABU would never attempt to subvert the local church's attempt to discover God's will for it through a careful study of Scripture. Indeed, the SABU constitution states, as the basis of the voluntary association of local Baptist churches,

That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters of faith and practice. These are revealed in and through the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. Each church has the liberty and responsibility, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, to interpret, to preach, and to administer Christ's will in these matters.

This is an excellent attempt to balance the role of the word, the Spirit, and the community in identifying the Lord's authority over his people. However, in stressing the liberty and responsibility of each local church to interpret and administer Christ's will, it fails to require local churches to take note of what God is saying to and through the other local churches.¹⁰ There can be no attempt by the churches meeting in Assembly to coerce or direct local churches with respect to their faith or practice. Only when an individual church persists in some

9. DW Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). According to Mark A Knoll, this is 'one of the most useful general definitions of the [evangelical] phenomenon'; *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 8.

10. This 'failure' can be considered a falling from the fullness of free church ecclesiology (as described by M Volf). However, to most Baptists, it is an essential means of maintaining the autonomy of the local church.

gross violation of what the other churches are willing to concede as acceptable Baptist faith and practice might action be taken to expel a church from the SABU family.¹¹

3. Reading Scripture as Baptists

With no official body or manual capable of determining Baptist polity, Baptists have embraced the metaphor of the Bible as the instruction manual for the church. The largest Baptist association of churches in the world, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), states in Article One of The Baptist Faith and Message Statement (2000), 'The Holy Bible . . . is a perfect treasure of divine instruction; . . . the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.'

This approach to establishing polity by attempting to get back to the Bible has been characteristic of Baptist churches since their formation. While all the churches of the Reformation attempted to break from what they saw as the corrupt practices of the Catholic Church, the Baptists were among those who most sought to start afresh. Not to start again (as if from scratch), but to start afresh—to recover the church of the New Testament and to model itself upon it. (John Smyth believed that, because there were no contemporary churches that were faithful to the gospel, he needed to baptise himself.¹²) For the early Baptists and for their heirs, the goal of Baptist church polity was to reproduce as faithfully as possible the church of the New Testament. In the 1970s, in the Baptist church in which I grew up, this was seen as both desirable and possible.

Article Six of the SBC's 'Baptist Faith and Message Statement' states, 'While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.' It seems to me that those who framed 'as qualified by Scripture' in Article Six assumed that the house-churches of the NT world and the leadership structures of those house-churches would be somehow like the way SBC churches do church now. Yet here lies the problem with the 'Bible as instruction manual' hermeneutic. Neither the church nor the 'office of pastor' in NT times can be identified with contemporary SBC

11. 'Gross violation' is not easily defined, but we expect that we will know it when we see it!

12. He later came to regret this and submitted himself to baptism by a Mennonite preacher.

churches.¹³ In order to read the instruction manual, some form of cultural translation is required.

An obvious example of such a cultural translation is the identification of 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent' in 1 Timothy 2:12 with 'I do not permit any woman to hold the pastoral office in a local church'. The problem is two-fold. One, Paul could not have had in mind the pastoral office as we practice it today. And two, it would be a rare Baptist indeed who would allow that simply because a person is ordained that person has 'authority' over them and they must accept their 'teaching'. 'Authority lies with the Scriptures not with some would-be Baptist Pope!' ¹⁴ Paul's instructions to Timothy and his church do not, *without interpretation*, apply to the ordination debate. The problem is that the instructional manual does not have a section on 'women in ordained ministry'. It does not even have a section on 'ordained ministry'.¹⁵ This metaphor of the instruction manual is inadequate and needs to be abandoned. It tempts us to read our issues into the NT text rather than to discover the issues that the text is attempting to address.¹⁶

A phenomenological reading of the New Testament would suggest that its genre is closer to 'historical narrative' than 'instruction manual'; its instructions are always applied first to a concrete historical situation. In a modernist world in which truth was (and is for many contemporary Baptists) understood as best expressed through propositions, Baptist churches often read church polity from Scripture without reference to its narrative context. The goal of a modernist

13. Robert Banks provides a narrative account of a first-century church in *Going to Church in the First Century* (second edition; Paramatta: Hexagon, 1985).

14. In this context 'Pope' is being used pejoratively rather than as an attempt to fairly represent the understanding and practice of the Roman Catholic Church.

15. This has caused some Baptists to reject ordination itself, eg in the Western Australian Baptist Union; but even when this has been done it has not led to a subsequent increase in the number of women in leadership.

16. As an exegetical principle, only once the issues of the text in its historical context have been understood are we able to apply the text to our contemporary situation, thus ensuring we have correctly translated what it is saying.

instruction manual hermeneutic is to find a proposition and generalise it. (However, this is not done without reference to current practice. There is no member SABU church that requires women to keep silent on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:12. Why?) Thus the attempt is made to make one of the propositions contained within 1 Timothy 2:12 into the interpretive key that will unlock the answer to our question of 'women and ordained ministry'. This, I would argue, is because we have made the text answer a question it is not asking. We have failed to find the question it is addressing and thus we have failed to be formed by its word.¹⁷

4. The practice of one New Testament church

The first-century church that I know best is the church in Rome.¹⁸ This church was founded some ten years or so after Pentecost, initially within the synagogues of Rome, when Jewish Christians followed the trade routes from the east and brought their new faith in Jesus with them. By the time Paul wrote to the church in Rome in 57 CE, there might have been between 250 and 500 Christians¹⁹ meeting in a network of house-churches dominated by Gentile converts (and thus separated from on-going involvement in the synagogues). These Gentile converts had chosen to belong to Christian house-churches rather than accepting Jewish proselytism and joining the synagogue. Their practices and their sympathies lay not with Jewish practices but with the cultural values they knew best. In his letter to them, Paul rebukes the Gentile majority for their arrogance towards the Jews and challenges them to be sensitive to the 'weaknesses' of their brother and sisters. He calls all Christians, Gentiles and Jews, to 'the obedience of faith' (1:5), to a life lived through walking with the Spirit (8:4).

17. I would suggest that 1 Timothy is addressing the issue of how our actions—eg the actions of quarrelling men, domineering women, conceited leaders, self-indulgent widows, slaves, and those who desire wealth—can bring the gospel into disrepute and so hinder the church's witness to the God 'who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (2:4). Now that will preach!
18. I am not arguing that the church in Rome is either the most important church of the first-century or even that it is representative of all other first-century churches. Rather, given Paul's approval of it (Rom 1:8–12), its practices represent a valid expression of acceptable church polity.
19. The population of Rome is estimated to have been about one million. The Jewish community may have numbered between 30,000 and 40,000.

Little is said about the practice or the structure of their worshipping communities. However, certain values can be discerned from Paul's list of greetings contained in chapter 16.²⁰ It is likely that Paul knew at least twelve of the twenty-six people greeted in his letter.²¹ He evidently knew the importance of those he did not know personally, for the decision to name these people in his first letter to the Christians in Rome suggests that these are people of significance within the Christian community. In particular, some are noted for their work for the Lord (*synergos* in 16:3, 9 and *kopian* in 16:6, 12 [bis]). Among these prominent Roman Christian workers are five women: Prisca, Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, and Persis. (By comparison, only three men are named in this group: Aquila, Andronicus, and Urbanus.²²)

While Paul identifies these people by their work in the Lord rather than by titles, the significance of their leadership role within the community should not be diminished. Paul uses the same terms to identify Timothy (*synergos* in 16:21) and his own labours for Christ (*kopian* in, for example, Phil 2:16, 1 Cor 15:10). Mary's work is specifically identified as 'among you' (16:6), that is, among 'all God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints' (1:7). There is no apparent distinction between the work done by the wife and husband in the team composed of Prisca and Aquila (16:3) although, based upon the culturally unusual practice of naming the wife first, Lampe concludes, 'Apparently, Prisca was more prominent in community activity than her husband.'²³

The appearance in Paul's list of greetings of Andronicus and Junia, whom Paul identifies as both 'my relatives who were in prison with me . . . [who] were in Christ before I was' and 'who are prominent among the apostles' (16:7), suggests that females in prominent leadership roles within the Christian community was not unique to Rome. (There is no possibility that 'apostle' could be used for a purely local office.) This greeting is so significant for any discussion of the

20. The evidence that chapter 16 was part of the original letter addressed to the Romans is overwhelming; see P Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, translated by M Steinhauser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 153–64.
21. *Ibid*, 167–8.
22. Lampe includes Rufus' mother and two males, Apelles and Rufus, as possible additions to this list (*ibid*, 165–6).
23. *Ibid*, 167.

leadership role of women in the early church that Junia has had both her gender and her position among the apostles unfairly questioned.

With respect to her gender, Lampe notes, 'The church fathers of late antiquity correctly perceived that Andronicus's companion was not a man. This changed only with Aegidius of Rome (1245-1316 CE).'²⁴

The case for reading the female name Junia rather than the male name Junias in Romans 16:7 has been made adequately in scholarship since the 1970s and has been widely accepted, while the REB and NRSV are, I believe, the first English translations to place 'Junia' in the text and relegate 'Junias' to a footnote.²⁵

Even the conservative scholar TR Schreiner writes that 'the likely conclusion is that Junia is a woman, though certainty is impossible'.²⁶

Many have interpreted the phrase 'who are prominent among the apostles' (16:7) as meaning that Junia (and Andronicus) were well known to, or well regarded by, the apostles. That is, Junia was a female but not an apostle. However, the scholarly consensus is again strongly in favour of reading these words as indicating that Paul considers this couple as apostles. CEB Cranfield comments that it is virtually certain that the phrase 'outstanding among the apostles' means 'outstanding in the group who may be designated apostles'.²⁷ A recent detailed case, taking into account the latest views to the contrary, can be found in Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (2003).²⁸ Schreiner also concludes that while Junia and Andronicus are not placed by Paul among 'the

24. *Ibid.*, 166 n 39. In fact, Lampe argues that those who reject Junia in favour of a masculine Junias have accepted 'an embarrassing solution fabricated by men'. See also RR Schulz, "Romans 16:7: Junia or Junias?," *ExpTim* 98 (1986-1987): 108-10.

25. RJ Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies in the Named Women of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 166.

26. *Romans* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 796.

27. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (sixth edition; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975-1979), 789.

28. Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 172-80. The detail provided by Bauckham is in response to the arguments of MH Burer and DB Wallace, 'Was Junia Really an Apostle? A Re-examination of Rom 16.7', *NTS* 47.1 (2001): 76-91, who attempt to change the recent scholarly consensus.

ranks of the Twelve', nor did they 'exercise the same kind of authority as Paul, Barnabas, or James', they are rightly called apostles.²⁹

Yet Schreiner goes on to assert, 'As a female missionary Junia may have directed her energies especially to other women.' But as any reader of commentaries will know, the word 'may' at this point indicates that Schreiner has gone beyond the text.³⁰ He justifies his speculation on the basis of Käsemann's remark, 'The wife can have access to the women's areas, which would not be generally available to the husband' and on 'the Pauline admonition in 1 Tim 2:12'.³¹ Neither of these is a sufficient basis upon which to curtail the scope of Junia's apostleship.

As an apostle, Paul did not feel the need to take a female companion with him in order for him to preach and teach the gospel to women. Why would Andronicus need a wife for this purpose? In fact, as has been adequately demonstrated, by meeting in the homes of Christians the early church was meeting in 'female space' (in contrast to the 'male space' of the public sphere).³² It was in the home that women could exercise positions of leadership.

The most direct points of contact with the role of the *pater familias* are the Pauline house-church patrons, both men and women . . . Especially noteworthy is the appearance of a number of women house-church patrons within Paul's Aegean mission sphere. They must be women of independent means who manage their own households as *mater familias*.³³

L Michael White notes that the terms associated with work and labour are regularly used by Paul to honour the efforts of his patrons,

29. *Ibid.*, 796-97.

30. Schreiner, *Romans*, 797.

31. *Ibid.*

32. KJ Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), especially 53-87.

33. LM White, 'Paul and Pater Familias', *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, edited by JP Sampley (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003), 467.

the house-church leaders. These terms are used in Romans 16 of both men and women.³⁴

Schreiner's appeal to 1 Timothy overlooks the more proximate, and therefore more relevant, textual examples of Prisca,³⁵ Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (and Phoebe³⁶). Schreiner is attempting to create theological conformity in the midst of historical diversity. He alludes to Moo who accepts,

Ministry in the early church was never confined to men; these greetings and other similar passages show that women engaged in ministries that were just as important as those of men. We have created many problems for ourselves by confining 'ministry' to what certain full-time Christian workers do. But it is important that we do not overinterpret this evidence either. For nothing Paul says in this passage (even in v.7) conflicts with limitations on some kinds of women's ministry with respect to men such as I think are suggested by 1 Tim 2:8–15 and other texts.³⁷

But Moo has *under*interpreted the evidence of Romans 16. On what textual basis does he believe that women 'engaged in ministries *that were just as important as those of men*'? The text does not speak of two (or more) types of ministries of equal importance but of coworkers and labourers—those who participate in the same ministry as Paul—who

34. *Ibid.*

35. We know Prisca was one of the people responsible for the teaching of Apollos (Acts 18:26).

36. Phoebe is commended to the Romans by Paul as a 'deacon of the church at Cenchreae [near Corinth] . . . for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well' (Rom 16:1–2; NRSV). Phoebe was evidently a significant leader of the Corinthian church who was privileged to carry Paul's letter to Rome and act as his representative of some sort. See the discussion in B Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 382–85). That such a person could act for Paul suggests that the Roman church accepted females in positions of responsibility within the Christian community.

37. D Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 927.

happen to be both female and male. On the basis of Romans 16 it is impossible to distinguish between what Mary (and Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis) did in labouring (*kopiaio*) for the Lord and what Paul did for the Lord. It is impossible to distinguish what Prisca did from what Aquila or Urbanus did as co-labourers (*synergoi*) with Paul. It is impossible to distinguish what Junia did from what Andronicus did to win prominence among the apostles. There is no 'women's ministry' in Romans any more than there is 'men's ministry'. There is only 'labour' for the Lord. But this comes as no surprise to readers of Romans, for Paul has already written in 12:3–8 that all Christians are recipients of 'gifts that differ according to the grace given to us' (v 6)—as Schreiner rightly notes, 'no member of the church is exempt, for every believer has been given a measure of faith and is called on to estimate himself or herself in accord with the apportioned faith'. These gifts are to be exercised for the benefit of the whole body of Christ. The limitations addressed in 1 Timothy 2:12 are more correctly described as being placed upon some women than upon 'some kinds of women's ministry'. (Exploring who those women are and why they are being limited in their ministry would take us beyond the church in Rome.)

Romans 16 does not tell us about the organisational structure of the house-churches of Rome. It certainly doesn't address the issue of 'ordination to the Baptist ministry'. But it does show that women laboured alongside Paul and other Christian men in the common cause of the gospel. It even suggests that, in Rome, it was the women who were the more prominent among the workers in the early Christian community.

Paul's letter to the Romans gives us ample historical evidence to accept women into positions of leadership within the church in the same roles as men. But this doesn't actually answer the question, What should our church do? How do we move from knowing what is permissible to implementing what is desirable for God's church?

5. Back to the Bible by looking to the *eschaton*

The debates in Baptist churches about women in leadership are, superficially, biblical arguments. However, too much biblical scholarship has demonstrated the reality of women leaders in the early church for anyone to believe that historical exegesis is not being supplanted by theological or cultural values. We read from within the distinct culture of our own faith community, looking for validation of

our accepted practices. (Or, in some contexts, looking for ammunition to negate our community's accepted practices.) This does not mean that the hermeneutical task of reading Scripture is hopelessly circular. Rather, it points us to the need for a hermeneutical spiral: an on-going reading of the text that continues to challenge the pre-judgments that we brought to the previous reading of the text.

But—and here I might part from many of my fellow Baptists—in which direction should the hermeneutical spiral spin? Back towards the first-century past or forward to the *eschaton*? My understanding of the diversity of the first-century church convinces me that the New Testament does not prescribe church practice and polity; it rather describes an historical diversity. With this assumption, there is no point attempting to spiral back towards an imaginary 'golden past'. Rather, we should be spiralling forward to the hope-filled eschatological future. This is what I see happening in the churches of the first-century. They sought to live in the light of the eschatological glory of the established kingdom, a light in which 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). They didn't always get there, for they were as limited by their culture and their sin as we are; but they knew the direction they were to travel. They didn't claim to have discovered a timeless and acultural pattern of being church (certainly, no such claim has been preserved in the New Testament canon), but they did speak hopefully of what was to come. And they did hold that future up against their practices in order to judge whether they were being true to their calling.

Paul's letter to the Romans demonstrates this perspective of eschatological glory to judge present practices. Paul challenges the Christians of Rome to unity, to bearing with the failings of the weak, and to mutual edification—all areas of present failure for the church in Rome—by an appeal to Scripture. 'For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope' (15:4). This appeal to Scripture looks forward, not back:

'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name'; and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'; and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him'; and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall

come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope. (Rom 15:9–12)

This was never the historical experience of the people of God. It was always the deep hope of God's people. For Paul, the *eschaton* had begun to break into the midst of God's people through the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent bestowal of the Spirit. His challenge to the church of Rome was to live in the light of their future hope.

The 'people of the Book', as we like to think of ourselves, are still people of hope. Our hope is for a time when all people will stand as one in Christ Jesus, without reference to their ethnicity, their social status, or their gender. We need to learn to read the Scriptures with our eyes opened by the future, not closed by the past, so that we 'abound in hope' (Rom 15:13).