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Dr Andrew Curry

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EDITORIAL

This edition of the Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal contains three very diverse articles that each suggest strengths and weaknesses in the thinking of Irish Baptists in 2024.

The first article explores the theological legacy of James Ussher (1581–1656), particularly his 1624 *An Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuite in Ireland.* Ussher's work often sought to defend Protestant beliefs against Roman Catholic theology in early 17th-century Ireland. The paper compares four of Ussher's main theological distinctions between Catholicism and Protestantism with the beliefs of Irish Baptist pastors in 2024, revealing both continuity and evolution in Protestant thought over 400 years. Ussher emphasized Scripture's authority, the importance of Patristics, the continuity of a true invisible Church, and had a pronounced apocalyptic emphasis. A 2024 survey of Baptist pastors revealed strong agreement with Ussher on biblical authority, but significant divergence on Patristics and apocalyptic theology. Pastors showed neutrality or uncertainty towards historical arguments against Catholic doctrines and no longer view Catholicism as the main obstacle to evangelism. The paper raises questions about doctrinal shifts and their implications for modern ministry.

The second article records the history of Windsor Baptist Church

which was constituted in 1931 and opened its first building in Malone Avenue, Belfast in 1934 ninety years ago. As the church was planning to move to refurbished premises at the Majestic Building not far away on the Lisburn Road, there was a desire to tell the story of the fellowship thus far. A book entitled *Windsor Baptist Church at Malone Avenue, Belfast 1934-2021* was written. This article is largely a summary of the book. Trevor Taylor provides Foundations, Nigel Younge offers Consolidation and Expansion and finally Paul Harron concludes with Expansion to the Present Day.

Lastly, David Luke reviews recent theological works addressing Christianity's historical roots and its relevance to modern Evangelicalism. Gavin Ortlund emphasizes theological retrieval, urging Protestants to reclaim their deep historical heritage rather than view their faith as a recent innovation. Douglas Sweeney calls for a renewed understanding of doctrine to strengthen Christian witness, highlighting the global nature of the church and its evolving doctrinal context. Sarah Irving-Stonebraker critiques today's "ahistoric age," advocating for Christians to act as "priests of history" by preserving and transmitting their heritage. Lastly, Samuel Parkison revives the concept of the beatific vision, urging believers to recentre their lives on the hope of seeing God. Collectively, these authors argue that modern Evangelicalism must reconnect with its historical and theological foundations to counter cultural drift, deepen discipleship, and recover a richer, more stable expression of faith grounded in tradition and Scripture.

All three articles recognise the gratitude Irish Baptists should have for our rich historical heritage and yet draws attention to the reality that often the priorities and awareness of the past are quickly taken for granted and even unconsciously replaced. It is hoped this edition of our journal stirs conversation provoked by those who have gone before to sharpen our focus going forward.

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HAS THE STORY CHANGED? FOUR HUNDRED YEARS SINCE THE FIRST ANTI-CATHOLIC WRITING IN IRELAND

ANDREW CURRY

The Reformation across Europe was first and foremost a theological movement. It is with this understanding that this article explores several doctrinal themes from the writings of James Ussher with particular emphasis on his first work *An Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuite in Ireland (1624)* to understand the quality of the indigenous Protestant thought in early 17th-century Ireland. It identifies four key distinctions Ussher made then between Roman Catholicism and

Protestantism[1] and highlights the continuity and discontinuity of those ideas four hundred years later among Irish Baptist pastors in 2024.

USSHER'S GROWING EMERGENCE

Trinity College Dublin was founded during a period of European history when public debate and argument through print were appropriate means to dispute political and religious issues. Jesuit Robert Bellarmine's (1542–1621)[2] writings—particularly *Disputationes de controversiis Christianar fidei adversus huius temporis haereticos*—set theological foundation and argumentation for Counter-Reformation missionaries in Ireland. Consequently, it became the focus for a Protestant answer—and James Ussher, a rising scholar, led the response.

Ussher's reputation was augmented by his unlikely relationship with King James I of England (1566–1625),[3] who supported his

[1] There was a Catholic Counter-Reformation taking place in Europe and being implemented in Ireland, during the time of Ussher, that sought to rid the church of corruption, "but there was one fundamental difference between the Catholic Reformation and its counterpart, which came to be known as Protestantism: the Catholic Reformation focused on practical, moral abuses; it did not seek to reform the theology of the church. This is why the Protestant Reformation was so important: it sought to address the theological foundations of the church and to reform the whole, root and branch." See Carl R. Trueman, *Reformation: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2011): 21–2.

[2] Robert Bellarmine was a Jesuit scholar and a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church. He was an important figure in the Counter-Reformation contributing most notably to the area of theology. His controversial works provoked many replies and became the focus of study in many Catholic and Protestant Universities. Arguably his most significant work was his *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei* (also often called *Disputationes*). The first edition took eleven years to write and was the first attempt to systematize the various religious controversies of his day.

[3] King James was James VI of Scotland and became also King of England and Ireland as James I. After the Union of the Crowns he based himself in London. During his reign the plantation of Ulster took place and the British colonisation of the Americas began. Arguably his most significant contribution to Christendom was his sponsoring of the Authorised King

work and even hosted him at royal dinners. Ussher dedicated his first book, *De succession*, to the king, engendering the beginning of their mutually favorable relationship. Ussher reported in the preface of his 1624 book, *Answer to Malone*,[4] that he had often eaten at the king's table. The support of the king and strength of Ussher's arguments quickly earned him a notable reputation. Unsurprisingly, King James issued an immediate appointment of Ussher as successor when Montgomery, Bishop of Meath died. Ussher formally took the role 2 December 1621. By the 1620s, Ussher was an established Protestant scholar who not only defined the theology of the Irish church, but also contributed to the development of Trinity College's academic reputation, sourcing key professors and books for the young university.

Ussher's credibility heightened on 29 January 1625 when he was appointed Archbishop of Armagh—the most powerful position in the Church in Ireland.[5] This promotion to the role of Irish Primate secured his reputation within the international scholarly community. As Ford notes, "Ussher from the 1620s began to be recognized as a member of the European republic of letters, exchanging book and Latinate courtesies with the leading academics ... the only native protestant Church of Ireland bishop who could move with ease in intellectual circles across the whole of northern Europe."[6] Ussher

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James Version of the Bible, possibly the most important English translation ever penned.

[4] William Malone (1585–1655) was a Jesuit missionary and writer who after training in Rome and Portugal was sent to Ireland to lead the counter-reformation mission. Eventually he was captured and banished at which point he went to Seville to continue working. His most significant writings were those related to his debate with Ussher.

[5] Prior to Ussher there had been some debate as to whether the Archbishopric of Armagh or Dublin was more significant. However, the Ulster plantation and the appointment of Ussher's predecessor Hampton in 1613—who prior to the role had been a royal chaplain—helped reestablish the claim of Armagh as the primacy within the Irish church. This became officially recognized on 26 June 1634, by a judgment of Wentworth. See *Ussher's Works*, I:160–3 (hereafter *UW*), for a description.

[6] Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early-Modern Ireland*

was not just an indigenous protestant scholar, but the pre-eminent theologian of the Irish movement.

THE SETTING FOR A THEOLOGICAL CLASH

Early 17th–century Ireland's religious practice was marked by a fog of superstition so thick that even the traditional clergy complained how little the people knew. "It was increasingly apparent that the Catholicism of the people was not the 'Roman' Catholicism of those theologians who had recently defined the faith at Trent."[7] Amid this national scene, a small number of Protestant ministers appeared advocating reformation. As they did, Catholic leaders launched their own aggressive Counter-Reformation efforts. Gribben notes, "thus sixteenth and seventeenth-century Ireland was a theological battleground, as the Roman Catholic hierarchy and Reformed preachers fought for the soul of the island."[8]

In the early stages of this battle, however, Protestant numbers were small, their doctrinal positions underdeveloped, and their thoughts often shaped by Anglican influences. Ussher's own anti-Catholic stance emerged even in opposition to members of his own family[9]—he remained a man full of conviction.

This conviction drove him to pen his 1624 work, *An Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuite in Ireland*, which responded to Jesuit William

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and England. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007: 134.

[7] Crawford Gribben, *The Irish Puritans: James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church.* Wipf & Stock: Eugene, OR, 2003: 19.

[8] Ibid., 20–1.

[9] The closeness of the religious division to Ussher is demonstrated by Fitzsimon who Ussher had his first public debate with, for he was Ussher's cousin, similarly Ussher's mother supposedly converted back to Roman Catholicism towards the end of her life. It is hard to estimate how this religious division would have affected the earnestness of Ussher's anti-Catholic disputes. It is may best be illustrated in the confrontation with his Uncle, Richard Stanihurst (1547–1618), who applied Matthew 10:34–6 to his nephew's actions, stating "not only does an Irishman clash with an Irishman, a Dubliner with a Dubliner, but even—and this most deeply saddens my heart—an uncle with a nephew who immaturely fights the Catholic faith." Cited in Ford, *James Ussher,* 62.

Malone's (1585–1655)[10] challenge in 1616 to identify when precisely the papacy had drifted from the original truth of the early church. Ussher's work was the first anti-Catholic apologetic written by an Irish-born Protestant to directly address Counter-Reformation theology in the Irish context.[11]

Alan Ford, a notable Ussher historian, notes four main theological and historical issues that were central in this intense debate in Ireland:

> the Bible—its text and its interpretation; the early church and the church fathers, and the extent to which they can be claimed as 'protestant' or 'catholic'; the linked and equally vexed question of descent—how the protestant church traced its origins back from the Reformation to Christ; and, finally, the issue of how to interpret and apply the apocalyptic books and passages of the Bible.[12]

The following sections will consider Ussher's arguments concerning each issue distinguishing Protestantism and Roman Catholicism and compare them with the positions of Irish Baptist pastors in 2024.

THE BIBLE

Gregg Allison observes, "as the Roman Catholic Church permitted other sources to lay claim to the title of authoritative truth, a

[10] The exchange here, as with his Uncle, was polite and could even be considered friendly, though the arguments are sure in their conclusions.
[11] This was one of many works written in a very short space of time that demonstrate the attitude of the Irish Church to the Roman Catholic theology of the Counter-Reformation that was competing with the Counter-Reformation church for the hearts of the people. Ford points out, "In England, for example, the standard modern catalogue of religious polemic in Elizabeth's reign runs to 630 books. The Irish equivalent is somewhat easier to compile: there is only one volume, and that was published just the year before the Queen died. But in the first four decades of the seventeenth century controversy, in print, in manuscript, and in person, grew exponentially." See Ford, *James Ussher,* 63.
[12] Ibid., 63–4.

multiple-source notion arose, consisting of written Scripture, church tradition, and the teaching office of the church."[13] This was formalised when the Council of Trent[14] decreed authoritative divine revelation came in two forms—"truth and discipline are contained in the written books and the unwritten traditions which, received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the apostles themselves as the Holy Spirit dictated, have come down even to us."[15] In this statement, the Roman Church asserted that divine revelation also rested in apostolic authority—not just Scripture[16]—and issues could not be disputed from Scripture alone. Allison notes, "Furthermore, the council sanctioned the church's own interpretation of Scripture as the only authoritative interpretation. Thus, according to the Roman Catholic Church, authoritative divine revelation comes from both Scripture and tradition, and only the Church's interpretation of Scripture is to be considered authoritative."[17]

In contrast, the young Protestant Church articulated in their 1615 confession, The Irish Articles of Religion,[18] that the Bible was "of

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[13] Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine.* Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2011: 79.

[14] Allison states, "the Council of Trent decreed that the Latin Vulgate—not the Hebrew Old Testament, not the Greek New Testament, and certainly not any vernacular edition—was the official version of Scripture. Then to prevent Protestant biblical interpretation from challenging the Roman Catholic Church's interpretation of Scripture, the Council of Trent declared that only the Church possesses the right to interpret the Bible." Ibid., 135.

[15] *Cannons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* 4th session (April 8, 1546), *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures,* in *CREEDS*, 2:79–80.

[16] For example, Allison states, "the Catholic Church also held that the Bible is not necessary for the church's existence but only for its well-being. The Protestant Reformers disagreed and once again championed the sufficiency and necessity of the Bible. Scripture is sufficient to know God and to trust and obey him completely; therefore, the church does not need anything (tradition, magisterium) or anyone (the pope) to supplement the Word of God." Allison, *Historical Theology,* 142.

[17] Ibid., 92.

[18] The Irish Articles of Religion were a statement of faith penned and

most certain credit and highest authority." It continued:

> Scripture is important, the articles declare, because it is "the ground of our religion, and the rule of faith and all saving truth" (article 1). Its authority is final and cannot be supplemented by the traditions of the church or new revelations: "It is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's word ... it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed upon necessity of salvation" (article 75). Even the historic ecumenical creeds are to be tested by Scripture: "...things ordained by them [General Councils], as necessary unto salvation, have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be shewed that they be taken out of holy scriptures" (article 76).[19]

For Ussher and his fellow ministers, just as it had been for the early aspects of the movement in mainland Europe, *Sola Scriptura* "became a decisive point of division between Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church."[20]

Early Reformers also emphasized translating the Bible into the ordinary language of the people.[21] Indeed, many thought "the Bible

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ratified by the official church in Ireland that clarified the reformed theology that marked the church at that point in its history with even greater clarity than the Thirty-nine Articles. The Articles would have a significant influence on the 1646 Westminster Confession.

[19] Cited in Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 39–40.

[20] Allison, *Historical Theology,* 79.

[21] Ussher's attitude concerning the Irish language is hard to understand because of his belief in the ecclesiological authority of the crown. Officially the government discouraged the use of Irish "because they considered it a barbarous tongue fit only for savages." The English government sought to "civilize" the Irish at the same time they evangelised them and so church services were switched from Latin to English—which hardly anyone understood. To the ordinary Irish person, this was merely a transfer from one foreign language into another." Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 17. Gribben continues: "Ussher used Irish, preserved Irish manuscripts, promoted Gaelic scholarship and believed the language was 'elegant and rich' ... yet when the government limited its

alone would carry all before it, that the mere experience of reading Scripture would sufficiently expose the errors of the papacy to win people over to Protestantism."[22] The first recorded call for vernacular Bibles[23] in Ireland came from James Ussher. As early as 1601, Ussher demonstrated that both Scripture and early church practice encouraged people to study the Bible for themselves.[24] Shortly after Ussher's request, attempts were made to translate the Bible into the two primary languages on the island—English[25] and

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use, he was happy to comply." (p. 36). I believe that Gribben is wrong to state that Ussher was happy to comply. This is a common misunderstanding among scholars who study Ussher; for the man's practice does not reveal the complexity of the man's thoughts. Ussher did comply with the King's law, but that fails to demonstrate he agreed with it. Rather, it simply shows he believed his duty to obey the crown was a priority. Some aspects of his practical ministry, his role in the formulation of the Irish Articles (see particularly article 4), and his love of Irish manuscripts, would indicate that though he complied, he disagreed with the law given.

[22] Ford, *James Ussher,* 64.

[23] The vernacular languages demanded in Ireland were both Irish and English. Though English translations existed and were in circulation in Ireland it was felt by the fellows at Trinity College that these were inadequate and so the pursuit for a truer translation in English was also stressed. See footnote 25 for a specific example.

[24] An example of this may be seen in Ussher's comments regarding Acts 17:11 where he states concerning the men from Berea "In whose example this course being recommended unto us by the Holy Ghost discovereth to the sight of the simplest the cousinage of these Romish merchants: which would make men believe that the books of the Scripture were so kept by the priests, that they were not in the hands of the people; and that the learning of the lawe from the mouths of the minister discharged the vulgar from intermedlinge with scriptures. As though these two could not stand together; but private reading of Scriptures must of force be denyed where publicke teaching of them is permitted." Cited in Ford, *James Ussher,* 64.

[25] Ambrose Ussher, who was James Ussher's brother and a notable linguist, translated the Bible into English, completing his fresh and contemporary translation just after the publication of the 1611 Authorized Version. "The purposes of the two translations were very different, reflecting the divergent concerns of the two Churches. Where James saw his new Bible as replacing the subversive puritan Genevan Bible,

Irish.[26] Ambrose Ussher, James' brother, wanted to refine the Authorized Version further to free it from "popish monstrosities." Meanwhile, William Daniel and William Bedell worked on Irish translations, intending to make Scripture accessible and break reliance on the papal-approved Latin Vulgate.

The Protestant translation efforts triggered further Counter-Reformation opposition. Jesuits, such as Henry Fitzsimon (c.1566–c.1643),[27] claimed the new versions were dangerous and inaccurate declaring "their Bibles ... have not been the word of God."[28] The debate centered on the textual basis for translation, with Protestant scholars preferring the Hebrew and Greek and Counter-Reformation proponents preferred the Latin Vulgate.[29] Disputes

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Ambrose Ussher's work was directed at the enemy without—he explained its purpose as being to contribute to 'the popish controversie' by freeing the Bible of 'popish monstrosities.'" Ibid., 65.

[26] William Daniel translated the New Testament into Irish in 1602 with the purpose "firmly, indeed fiercely, anti-papal, as he made quite clear in his preface, where he complained that Ireland 'doth generally sit in darkness' because 'Satan hath hitherto prevailed ... through the ignorance of our ministers, the carelessness of our magistrates, and the subtlety of Antichrist and his vassals, the filthy fry of Romish seducers, the hellish firebrands of all our troubles'." Ibid., 65.

[27] There is a degree of debate surrounding the specific birth and death dates of Henry Fitzsimon. He was a cousin of Ussher and had been educated at Protestant Oxford and became a defender of the Protestant faith until he came in contact with an old English Jesuit who won Fitzsimon over through debate. Having embraced Catholicism he became a Jesuit and alongside Father Archer reestablished the Jesuit mission in Ireland. He was arrested in 1600 but used his imprisonment as a means to publicise the cause of Catholicism in Ireland until he was banished from Ireland in 1604. He served as a chaplain to the Irish soldiers in the Imperial army during the Thirty Years War and published a diary of his experience. In 1630 he returned to Ireland where he continued his Jesuit missionary work until the Irish Rebellion. He was put under sentence of death but managed to escape in the winter of 1641 and subsequently died in an unknown location.

[28] Henry Fitzsimon, *A Replie to Riders rescript.* Rouen: France, 1608: 47.

[29] For example, "The same sacred and holy council—considering that no small advantage may accrue to the church of God, if it be made known which out of all the Latin editions, now in circulation, of the sacred

sparked around theological implications of certain translations (notes and glosses included) as well as who was qualified to translate or interpret Scripture.

This scholarly clash played out in a series of written exchanges. When Jesuit Christopher Holywood defended the Vulgate of 1604 in response to Cambridge Professor, Puritan William Whitaker, it was Ussher who clinched the argument. According to Ford, Ussher "completed the hibernicization of the dispute by taking on Bellarmine and Holywood at great length in his theological lectures, using the full authority of protestant, humanist, and patristic scholarship to defend the accuracy and orthodoxy of the Hebrew and Greek texts."[30]

Allison notes, "the Roman Catholic Church reacted strongly to this Reformation doctrine of the sufficiency and necessity of Scripture. It did so because the Protestant position was in direct attack on the importance of church tradition and conciliar decrees as a supplement to the Bible."[31] Ussher maintained individuals in the pews could discover and know God through Scriptures and preaching—even testing those who claimed to speak for Him.

In contrast to their Roman Catholic counterparts,[32] the young official church in Ireland insisted only Scripture could be considered a completely reliable measure of doctrine and practice—the pope did

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books, is to be held as authentic—ordains and declares, that the old [Latin] Vulgate edition, which , by the long use of so many ages, has been approved of in the church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons, and expositions, held as authentic; and that no one dare or presume to reject it under any pretext whatsoever." See *Cannons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* 4th session (April 8, 1546), *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures*, in *CREEDS*, 2:82.

[30] Ford, *James Ussher,* 66.

[31] Allison, *Historical Theology,* 156.

[32] For example, Robert Bellarmine, of whom Ussher's lectures were a response, explained, "We assert that the whole necessary doctrine, whether concerning faith or practice, is not clearly contained in Scripture; and thus besides the written word of God we assert that furthermore the unwritten word of God is required, i.e., divine and apostolic traditions." Cited in Allison, *Historical Theology,* 156.

not offer extra insight into God nor his standards. Only what God "hath commanded in his holy Scripture and no such works as men have devised out of their own brain, of a blind zeal and devotion, without the warrant of the word of God (article 42)" was binding. "Obedience to God's Word—and it alone—is the right form of obedience."[33] Ussher's ultimate source of truth was Scripture alone—and by it he could discern the falsehood of the Roman Catholic system.

PATRISTICS

According to Timothy George, "the *sola* in *sola scriptura* was not intended to discount completely the value of church tradition, but rather to subordinate it to the primacy of Holy Scripture."[34] Consequently, debate also took place about whether the Protestant or Catholic church could assert an honest claim to theological resemblance to the early church.

Ussher needed to be able to answer the Roman Catholics on their strongest ground—their appeal to church history. Protestants argued the Reformation was simply born out of a desire to bring the church back to the purity of the first five hundred years shadowed by papal corruption, while Counter-Reformation scholars mocked Protestant faith as undeveloped and novel. For example, William Malone, the famous Counter-Reformation missionary who Ussher was responding to, proclaimed:

> Your doctors and masters grant that the Church of Rome, for four or five hundred years after Christ, did hold the true religion. First then would I fain know, what bishop of Rome did first alter that religion, which you commend them of the first four hundred years? In what pope's day was the true religion overthrown in Rome? Next, I would fain know, how can your religion be true, which disalloweth of many

[33] Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 45.

[34] Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers.* 25th ed. B&H Academic: Nashville, TN, 2013: 385.

> chief articles, which the saints and fathers of that primitive Church of Rome did generally hold to be true?[35]

The Counter-Reformation propaganda on this issue was extremely compelling among the Native Irish. Malone specifically highlighted the authority of tradition; the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist; auricular confession and the power of priests to forgive sins; Purgatory; prayer for the dead; *limbus partum;* Christ's descent into hell; prayers to saints and use of images; and finally, free will and the merit of works, as doctrines that the early church held but Protestantism had rejected.[36] Ussher responded, "it did not make sense how the early church marked by its purity, a principle itself undisputed, could hold to doctrine that the 'new protestant' faith so venomously rejected."[37]

Jesuits considered the fathers to be theirs employing them to mock the Protestant rejection of doctrines such as praying for the dead. This propaganda was reinforced by the fact that among many Protestants—especially in the early days of the Irish Reformation—were hesitant to use the Church Fathers to respond. They feared it would undermine the principle of *Sola Scriptura.* Ussher, however, rejected that the Catholic church had exclusive claim to the fathers. Early on in his studies, Ussher devoted large amounts of time to studying patristics. His biographer, Nicholas Bernard, claimed Ussher devoted 18 years (1601–19) to carefully studying the works of the fathers.[38] This was at a time when great mystery surrounded patristics and the

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[35] *UW*, III: 4–5.

[36] These points are found throughout William Malone, *A reply to Mr James Ussher his Answere.* Douai: France, 1627.

[37] *UW*, III: 4–5.

[38] Nicholas Bernard, *The Life and death of the most reverend and learned father of our church Dr James Usher.* Dublin, 1656: 29. In finding these works, Ussher cast his net wide, employing both Protestant and Catholic connections to help him in his pursuit. An example of this may be seen in letters written to his Catholic uncle, Richard Stanihurst, with whom he had debated.

textual criticism needed to establish which sources were legitimate[39] was tedious and time consuming.

Ussher's response to Malone, *Answer to a Challenge made by a Jesuit in Ireland* (1624), demonstrated Church Fathers stood theologically aligned with Protestant church in actuality and that many of the most important Catholic doctrines had no foundation in the traditions of the early church. According to Gribben, in all these things "the authority of traditions, the real presence of Christ in the mass, confession of sin to a priest and the priest's power to forgive sins, the existence of purgatory and the necessity of prayers for the dead, prayers to saints, images and merits—Ussher demonstrated that the Church Fathers did not believe in any of them."[40]

Ussher also rejected the question for a precise date when the Church of Rome had forsaken the truth,[41] arguing,

> First, we do not hold that Rome was built in a day; or that the great dunghill of errors, which now we see in it, was raised in an age: and therefore it is a vain demand to require from us the name of any one bishop of Rome by whom or under whom this Babylonish confusion was brought in; and second, the errors were not those of blatant heretics, but rather the "mystery of iniquity" referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 which is cloaked in the name of piety—much more difficult to pin down.[42]

Ussher proceeded to then devote a chapter to each area of

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[39] "Here Ussher cooperated with the first librarian of the Bodleian library, Thomas James, who, convinced the Catholics had perverted the patristic texts, was engaged in the task of researching more accurate editions." Ford, *James Ussher,* 68. Ussher's own scholarship in this regard was exceptional; this is seen more notably in his work on the letters of Ignatius.

[40] Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 35.

[41] This was one of the questions raised by Malone in the work mentioned earlier.

[42] *UW*, III: 9–10.

doctrine questioned by Malone. In every case, Ussher offered a doctrinal history and development of Protestant church teachings. Ussher structured his work simply. He offered minimal comments, extensively quoting Scripture, early church fathers, and modern writers to illustrate doctrinal development. Insisting on being careful to not misrepresent the fathers, Ussher argued that if one read the patristics thoughtfully and applied textual criticism where needed, it became clear that,

> they [the Roman Catholic Church] have only the shell without the kernel, and we the kernel without the shell: they having retained certain words and rites of the ancient church, but applied them to new invented doctrine; and we on the other side, having relinquished these words and observances, but retained nevertheless the same primitive doctrine, unto which by their first institution they had relation.[43]

Ussher's argument is clear in each area of disputed doctrine raised by Malone. There is "no ... wall of separation betwixt the ancient doctors and us," and concerning the doctrine laid out at the Council of Trent, he states "this doctrine ... we cannot but reject as being repugnant to that which we have learned both from the scriptures and from the fathers."[44]

Ussher's work was critical for the young Protestant church in Ireland. It established the legitimacy and historical legacy of their faith and practice. One English minister in 1625 said, "the reverend and learned bishop of Meath hath lately put out a worke in answere to a Jesuite, of the noveltie of poperie, in so complete a manner, as that a man would thinke, as it was said of the answer of our blessed savior, none should dare to ask that question anymore."[45]

Ussher's work instilled confidence within the Protestant

[43] Ibid., vi.
[44] Ibid., 90.
[45] John Mayer, *An antidote against popery.* London, 1625: v.

Church to study and consider the Early Church Fathers. He also highlighted the theological continuity between the Celtic Church and his contemporary Irish Protestant Church and the differences from the Catholic Church. In doing so, Ussher had placed in the hands of the Irish the authoritative text by which to know God along with the consent of the Church Fathers to study it.

LEGITIMACY AND DESCENT

Though Ussher demonstrated a shared doctrinal foundation between the Irish church and the Church Fathers, the question of direct decent still needed to be addressed. In a society where family ancestry equated legitimate claim to title and authority, the apparent novelty of the Protestant movement was a common attack of Counter-Reformation evangelists.[46] Ussher's bold drive to show the Roman Catholic Church's corruption was met with intensified accusations in this vein. The Counter-Reformation rightly saw that any corruption would surely undermine their use of the Roman Church as a source of their legitimacy.

The Catholic missionaries apologetic of Protestant novelty had a profound effect upon the Native Irish—"the Church of Rome might have needed correction, it nevertheless formed a continuous, visible and historical link with the ancient Church."[47] Ussher recognised the evangelistic barrier that such an argument possessed. Ford explains, "it was particularly sensitive in Ireland, where the Reformation seemed to have no native roots, but was simply imposed by a foreign

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[46] For example, in 1581 Edmund Campion, an Irish historian and Jesuit martyr in England stated, "at the very sound of the word church, the enemy turns pale. Over the span of fifteen centuries up to Luther, he complained his opponents had been unable to provide evidence of a single town, village, or house which was Protestant." Cited in Ford, *James Ussher,* 70.

[47] Bruce Gordon "The Changing Face of Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth Century Europe", in Bruce Gordon (ed.) *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth Century Europe* 2 Vols., St Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Scholar Press: Aldershot, UK, 1996: 2:1.

power."[48] "Where was your church before Luther?" was such a popular question that, Gribben says, "next to the translation of Scripture, the writing of church history was the most important objective for the defense of the reformed faith"[49] in Ireland.

The dilemma for Protestants was how to go about establishing their legitimacy. One approach would be to claim descent from the Catholic Church—this had the advantage of offering a clear line of succession, but meant associating themselves with the very organisation and papacy they were rebelling against. Alternatively, they could reject the visible church and instead consider an invisible church kept by God through election—linked not through physical descent but through common Christian thought. While this concept seems normal to Irish Baptists today, at the time it was considered radical.

The idea of an invisible church created new issues. It meant accepting that there may have been periods when there was no true visible church.[50] Even more radically, it allowed Protestant succession to be linked through groups in the Middle Ages declared heretical by the Catholic Church and opposed by the papacy.

Ussher and his Trinity colleagues chose this more radical approach.[51] Ussher wanted to disassociate himself and the "true faith" from the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church by separating theological systems and lineages and formulating

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[48] Ford, *James Ussher,* 71.

[49] Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 33.

[50] This denial of the legitimacy of the visible church and emphasis on invisible succession has caused problems for high church Anglicans who have written on Ussher, for example, E. W. Watson, 'James Ussher', in W. E. Collins (ed.), *Typical English* Churchmen. SPCK: London, 1902: 64, said "in a collection of biographies designed to typify Anglican churchmanship, saw Ussher's vision of the succession as a 'strange distortion of history', which destroyed the church's claim to historical continuity." Ford, *James Ussher,* 75.

[51] Though it must be said that Matthias Flacius Illyricus, the organiser of the Magdeburg Centuries, and John Foxe's *Acts and Monument, The Book of Martyrs*, had a huge influence upon the philosophical approach adopted by Ussher.

competing histories and understandings.

How, though, was truth passed down through the generations—especially when the visible church was becoming increasingly corrupt? It was a question that could not be ignored. Ussher most definitively answered it in his work, *De succession,* which provided "*an historical account of the most important question of the continual succession and condition of the Christian church ... from apostolic times up to the present.*"[52] There was, according to Ussher, a pure stream of Christianity connected by a shared faith that encompassed *some* rather than *all* of the official church through history. This stream even incorporated some small pre-Reformation groups, such as the Waldensians and Albigensians, that had remonstrated the official church.[53] Ussher believed that finding a unity of faith was the appropriate way to study Church History, for faith concerns things unseen. This was in contrast to Roman Catholic thinking, that relied on physical succession. Ussher believed "the continuity of the true visible Church requires the profession of that religion which is able to make a man wise unto salvation."[54]

In other works, Ussher showed the faith of the ancient Irish church (as established by St. Patrick) was essentially identical that of contemporary Irish Protestants. His theme asserted the pre-Reformation Catholic church only apostatised when, at the Council of Trent (1545–1653), its theologians included various medieval theological developments (deemed heretical by Ussher) within the

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[52] Cited in Ford, *James Ussher,* 72.

[53] So thorough was Ussher's work on the Waldensians that Daniel Featly said that he "so cleared them even by the testimonies of Papists, from those erroneous assertions and scandalous aspersions, that the Papists themselves seeme to be ashamed of their shameless slander." Daniel Featley, *The Romish Fisher Caught In His Owne Net.* R. Milbourne: London, 1624: 3, v.

[54] The original statement penned by Ussher is in Latin and is as follows "Ad verae visibilis Ecclesiar constitutionem illus require religionis professionem que posit hominem sapientem redder ad salute" in *UW*, II: 21.

official teaching of the church.[55] If the battle for the Reformers "was not one between forms, or emphases, or traditions; it was between those who had the gospel and those who were committed to hiding it, or opposing it, or abolishing it altogether,"[56] He was driven by a belief that the true heritage of Patrick needed to be redeemed from the Jesuits scholars who masked what the Irish Church historically believed.

Using Scripture, Patristic thought, and history of succession (not requiring involvement of the Roman Catholic Church), Ussher established an authoritative foundation for Protestant theology and worship that was entirely different from the contemporary Counter-Reformation system in Ireland.

APOCALYTIC

Among the above areas of debate, one particular aspect undergirded Ussher's arguments and most acutely expressed his separation of Catholic and Protestant religious systems—interpretation of the apocalyptic passages of Scripture. Here, Ussher believed he had discovered the blueprint for history[57] and explanation for the current religious and political tension in Ireland. According to Ussher's exposition, the Roman Catholic Church was not just different from the Protestant, but antithetical.[58] He determined it embodied the

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[55] Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 33.

[56] Trueman, *Reformation,* 29.

[57] It has been suggested that Ussher may have flirted with millennialism, especially later in the development of his thought. Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550–1682.* Four Courts Press: Dublin, 2000.

[58] Ussher's friend, Christopher Sibthop, demonstrates why Ussher and others felt the need to oppose so strongly Roman Catholic system that shared so much of the Protestant Church's historic roots saying, "that your pope is the grand Antichrist, that your Romish church is the whore of Babylon, and that your religion is false and antichristian, and consequently abominable, and to be deserted. Neither maketh it anything against this that the Church of Rome was once a good church. For she could not have beene a whore, if she had not beene before an honest woman." Bodleian Library, Oxford., MS Rawlinson C 849, fol. 295v.

rival system Scriptures declared would persecute and oppress the faithful prior to Christ's return.

This claim was not just a tool for argument but, according to Ford,

> carried with it a powerful eschatological impulse, a temptation to believe that you were truly living in the "last days," to look around and see, in the decay of contemporary society and the desperate struggle between Protestant truth and Catholic darkness,[59] a clear sign that the final battle was about to be joined and the world was about to end.[60]

In the Irish Protestant Church, the pope was known as the Antichrist,[61] for, as far as Ussher was concerned, there was a logical

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Cited in Ford, *James Ussher,* 78–9.

[59] The political environment in Europe along with the exposed nature of Ireland's coastline meant that the small number of Irish Protestants on the island were constantly worried about the threat of invasion and thereby more attune to see the Catholic-Protestant divide through an apocalyptic lens. The following two letters illustrate the concern. Letter XL of *UW*, XV: 151–2, from James Ussher in 1619 demonstrates how news of aggressive violence in Europe against Protestants had reached Ireland. Whilst Letter CXXXVI in Vol. XV p. 412–4 from Sir John King to Ussher in June 30 1628, states: "It is certain that in Spain are wondrous great preparations for war, especially sea-service…If his fleet come on this summer, as it is thought it will, and pass the narrow seas unfought withal, and unbeaten by us, it is to be feared that Spain and France, or one of them, will next land upon our continent, and sit down and fortify; being hopeful, as it may be well imagined, of aid from English papists, whereof the kingdom is too well stored." *UW*, xv: 413. This letter illustrates the fear of invasion that existed and the rumor that was spreading concerning Spanish and French threat. Also in same letter the writer states "I pray to keep the Spaniards out of Ireland, for we shall far better hold tack with them here, if they should land, than you can do there, where too many are ready to join with them." *UW*, XV: 414. Showing that people who wrote to Ussher worried about the fragile political system in Ireland and that they saw the real potential that should the island be invaded, many Irish would fight for the Catholic invaders.

[60] Ford, *James Ussher*, 77.

[61] Ussher himself had debated accordingly in his first public debate with Fitzsimon when only nineteen years old. Interestingly, Fitzsimon, contrary

connection between the Bible's teaching of the Antichrist and Rome. References such as Revelation 17, which speaks of "the great whore of Babylon who would sit on the seven mountains," he understood to be descriptive of Rome.[62] In Ussher's mind, logic dictated that "he onlie that maketh Rome his principall seate is Antichrist."

It is, therefore, no surprise that when the Irish Articles were created in 1615, they declared that the pope was "that man of sin" foretold in the Holy Scriptures, "whom the Lord shall consume with the Spirit of his mouth, and abolish with the brightness of his coming."[63] For the first time,[64] Protestant conviction that the pope was Antichrist had gained creedal status.[65]

Such strong conviction regarding the head of the Roman Church inevitably raised questions of the current status of the Church of Rome. Irish Protestants answered employing 2 Thessalonians 2:4, which states the Antichrist would sit in the temple of God. There

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to other Counter-Reformation scholars of the period, was willing to concede to Ussher's exegetical arguments that the Antichrist would come from Rome but argued that this was a future event and not true of the current church or current Pope.

[62] Another example of this may be found in the response written to Warren, a minister, who wrote to Ussher in 1617 asking for help interpreting the woman and beast from Revelation 17:8. Ussher responded, saying "the woman/Babylon was Rome; while the beasts corresponded to the two beasts mentioned in Revelation 13:1 and 13:11—by the first was meant the Roman empire; the second corresponded initially to the *pontifex maximus*, the Roman high priest, and now to his successor, the papacy which had in turn taken on many of the attributes of the old Roman emperors." Ford, *James Ussher,* 78. See original source examples of this in *UW*, xv: 126–7 and *UW*, xii: 545–50.

[63] Ford, *James Ussher,* 93–4.

[64] Martin Luther did apply the Antichrist passages to the Pope. In fact, like Ussher, he identified "the institution of the papacy—not just individual corrupt popes—with the Antichrist. This conviction led to his demand that the Roman Catholic Church had to be destroyed for the sake of the true church." Allison, *Historical Theology,* 690. The significance of the Irish Articles was, therefore, not the newness of thought but in the boldness of proclamation as this was the first time such thinking became creedal.

[65] Gribben, *The Irish Puritans,* 47.

was no agreement, however, regarding the implications of this verse. Some believed such a church could no longer be thought of as true at all. Others, such as Ussher, adopted a more cautious interpretation—"we must distinguish the papacy from the church wherein it is, as the Apostle said, Antichrist from the temple of God wherein he sitteth."[66] According to Ussher's interpretation, though the leadership, dogma, and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church had been corrupted—especially since Trent—there may be some among its lay people who followed the true God but remained ignorant of the full extent of the corruption.[67]

For Irish Protestants who held the minority position on the island, this apocalyptic thought offered an overarching explanation for their place in the world—as an engagement in the battle between Christ and Antichrist.[68] The rationale followed that political strife (such as the Nine Years War) could be understood by the Protestants theologically as conflict between two spiritual enemies.[69] Protestants could more freely accept their numbers were small—for such was to be expected and in no way demonstrated error in their faith. It also encouraged them that God would continue to protect them, and that one day they would prove to be victorious with Him.

Modern readers are often tempted to dismiss Ussher's apocalyptic concerns and only focus on his scholarship, textual

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[66] *UW*, II: 490.

[67] This may have been because of the particular socio-religious situation in Ireland at the beginning of the 1600's where the Protestant and Counter-Reformation academics and preachers sought to win allegiance from the Native Irish who were by and large ignorant of the doctrine held by either side.

[68] Ford, *James Ussher,* 80.

[69] This understanding is reflected in the following thoughts by Adair. "That which mainly instigated them to this wicked course, was, that they were Papists under the power and conduct of the Roman Antichrist—that Whore of Babylon, and bloody persecutor of all who worship not the Beast—who could never be satisfied with the blood of those who own the truth of Christ against Antichrist." Patrick Adair, *A True Narrative, The Rise and Progress of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (1623–1670).* C. Aitchison: Belfast, 1866: 64.

criticism, and historical research. However, to do so masks the urgency and heart behind the Reformation movement he sought to lead theologically. Ford highlights, "his interpretation of apocalyptic was central to his thinking."[70] Ussher had no doubt the pope was the Antichrist. This was not purely academic—but a worldview he taught to his students at Trinity and preached to his parishioners.[71] In this approach, one sees the clearest picture of how Ussher

[70] Ford, *James Ussher,* 83.

[71] The following is taken from *Body of Divinity* a Catechism constructed by Ussher using other sources he thought worthy for the instruction of lay people in the church. It therefore uniquely reflects what Ussher wanted to communicate to the parishioners in the church.

> Who is that Antichrist?
> He is one who under the colour of being for Christ, and under title of his vicegerent, exalteth himselfe above, and against Christ, opposing himself against all his offices and ordinances both in church and common-wealth, bearing authority in the church of God; ruling over that city with seven hills, which did bear rule over nations, and put our lord to death: a man of sinne, a harlot, a mother of spiritual fornications to the kings and people of the nations, a childe of perdition, and a destroyer establishing himself by lying miracles and false wonders. All which marks together do agree with none but the Pope of Rome...
>
> What is the use of all this doctrine?
> That whosoever are partakers of the sins of *Rome,* are also under the same cure: and therefore such of us as have lived in popery should examine ourselves if we have grown in the knowledge of the truth: and secondly, by the change of our affections, as whether we hate popery, and love the truth unfeignedly, and so let every one judge himself, that he be not judged, and that with harder judgment, according as God hath been the longer patient towards us.
>
> What further?
> That there can be no sound agreement betwixt light and darknesse, falsehood and truth, God and Beliall, and therefore no reconciliation can be devised betwixt them. For if the members of Antichrist shall be destroyed, we cannot in any sort communicate with them in their errors unless we will bear them company in their destruction also.

James Ussher (ed.), *A Body of Divinitie.* London, 1645: 438–9.

understood the Roman Catholic system. Ussher did not just see the Roman Catholic system as corrupt—he saw it as a false worship system. He understood it to be deceptively designed to lead many astray from the true faith as revealed in Scripture and taught by the Protestant Church in Ireland.

COMPARISON WITH CONTEMPORARY IRISH BAPTIST THINKING

This article analysed the four main issues used by Ussher to show the divergence between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. In Ussher's analysis of each, he demonstrated his belief that Protestantism is a true religion and Roman Catholicism is false. In the early part of 2024, a survey was sent out to the pastors of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland (ABCI) to determine to what degree Ussher's views have continued or changed.

At the time this survey was carried out, 101 churches had a pastor.[72] Forty-four pastors completed the survey—18.2% of which serve in the Republic and 81.8% in Northern Ireland.

Of the pastors who completed the survey, the breakdown of experience is as follows. The largest group represented was those who have served 1–5 years at 34.1%, while the second was those who have served over 15 years at 31.8%, with 22.7% serving 5–10 years and 11.4% serving 10–15 years. Overall, this is reflective of the

[72] Thirty-two churches in the Republic of Ireland have a pastor while seventy-two in Northern Ireland have a pastor. At the end of December 2023 there were twenty-eight vacant churches. However, when provision for pastoral cover via an interim pastor is taken into account (Carndaisy, Shankill and Thurles) or the presence of a Baptist Missions worker, there are 20 churches without vocational pastoral provision at 31 December 2023. At the time this historical society address was given in March 2024 new pastors began to work with the Baptist churches in Gortmerron and Furbo. This left eighteen churches vacant—Brannockstown, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Coagh, Cregagh, Dromore, Enniskillen, Grace Tullycarnet, Grove, Knockconny, Limavady, Magherafelt, Newcastle, Saintfield, Sion Mills, Tralee, Westside and Whitehead. Of these eighteen, three are not actively searching (Cregagh, Enniskillen and Grace Tullycarnet), leaving fifteen churches actively seeking a pastor.

make-up of Baptist Association pastors.

After data gathering, a sanity check was carried out on the Likert scale questions discussed under the headings below, by running a computer simulation ("bootstrapping") to generate confidence intervals. The simulation was under the assumption that if Ussher took the survey, he would answer "Strongly Agree" 19 out of 20 times, assuming he would answer "Agree" the remaining time.

A dataset was created, and random samples taken to find out the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval for Ussher's responses to his own questions.[73] This confidence interval is (4.922, 4.952) where a score of 5 corresponds with "Strongly Agree," meaning that in our survey, any mean score of less than 4.922 indicates significant deviation from Ussher's viewpoint. In other words, if 4 of the 43 pastors answer "Agree" instead of "Strongly Agree," the average score will fall below 4.922, indicating a change in position from that of Ussher.

The result recorded under each heading below shows the average response. Interestingly, only the first two questions (where the pastors unanimously responded "Strongly Agree") indicate no change from Ussher's thinking. The rest of the questions show statistically significant change. The lower the number (scale 5–1) the more statistically significant the result. Therefore, if the result sits 3.501 to 4.922, pastors generally agree with Ussher but there is some disagreement. If the result sits 2.501 to 3.499, pastors generally feel neutral about this statement, even though Ussher felt very strongly. If the score is less than 2.5, pastors generally disagree about this statement even though Ussher felt very strongly.

[73] To create the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval: First we created a simulated dataset of 1000 responses by Ussher with 95% probability that he would answer "Strongly Agree." Then we ran 2000 iterations where we re-created the dataset by sampling 1000 responses with replacement, then took the mean of that dataset, giving us 2000 means. We are reporting the adjusted bootstrap confidence interval.

ABCI PASTORS ON BIBLE

For Ussher the issue of the authority of Scripture is essential in providing a consistent means to develop one's understanding of God and to test the truthfulness of what is preached. In Ussher's thought, any other source placed alongside Scripture will result in a false understanding of theology and produce a form of idolatrous worship. He also believed it important to have a modern vernacular translation of the Scriptures from the best Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

The response of ABCI pastors in 2024 indicates the following:

- They strongly agree (Result 5) with Ussher that "Scripture is the ground of our religion, and the rule of faith and all saving truth."



- They strongly agree (Result 5) with Ussher that "It is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's word nor decree anything against the Bible's clear teaching."



- They generally agree with Ussher, but there is some disagreement (Result 4.864) that "The historic ecumenical creeds are to be tested by Scripture and the things ordained by them as necessary for salvation, have neither strength or authority, unless they may be shown to reflect the Bible."



- They generally agree with Ussher but there is some disagreement (Result 4.182) that an up-to-date translation of the Bible, from the best available Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, in the common vernacular is essential for effective evangelism and defense against theological error. This is unsurprising as some Irish Baptist Association churches place a high value on the Authorised Version.

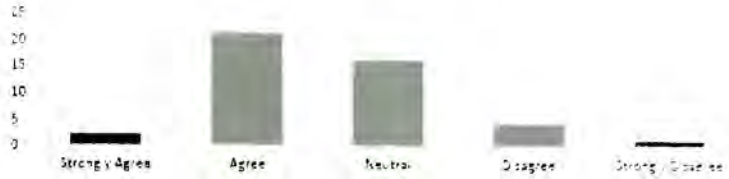


ABCI PASTORS ON PATRISTICS

Ussher showed that the Protestant understanding of theology and worship agreed with that professed by the Early Church Fathers. In doing so, Ussher sought to expose the inconsistency of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church of his day and show that they had drifted from true, historic belief.

The response of ABCI pastors in 2024 indicates the following:

- They generally feel neutral that "a good understanding of the teachings of the early church fathers is important to establish the legitimacy of the faith we profess amongst the people of Ireland," even though Ussher felt very strongly (Result 3.432) about it, with only 23 of the 44 saying they agree or strongly agree.



Two questions were then asked to determine the pastors' confidence in using the patristic writings to argue against two specific Roman Catholic doctrines namely, the real presence of Christ in the mass and the priest's power to forgive sins.

The results demonstrated the following:

- Pastors generally feel neutral (Result 3.046) about their ability "to point to specific writings of the church fathers that show they did not believe in the real presence of Christ in the mass as taught by the Roman Catholic church" even though Ussher was confident to do so.



- Pastors generally feel neutral (Result 3.023) that they "could point to specific writings of the church fathers that show they did not believe in the priest's power to forgive sins as taught by the Roman Catholic Church," even though Ussher was confident to do so.



These results indicate that Irish Baptist pastors feel unsure about their ability to defend their faith and practice with the writings of the church fathers and are generally neutral about the need to be able to do so as part of their apologetic in Ireland.

ABCI PASTORS ON DESCENT

Ussher unfolded the idea of an invisible church to demonstrate that the Protestant Church was not a new faith, but one that had been preserved by God Himself throughout history through the means of a faithful remnant—in contrast to the increasingly corrupt Roman Catholic system.

The response of ABCI pastors in 2024 indicates the following:

- They felt neutral (Result 3.386) towards the statement "The ancient Irish church—as established by St. Patrick—was essentially identical in core faith values to contemporary Irish Baptists" with 57% of respondents selecting neutral.



- They generally agree with Ussher but there is some disagreement (Result 4.704) that "though individual churches and denominations may drift and apostatise, God always maintains a true remnant of believers at each stage of history who hold onto true Christian belief."



- They generally agree with Ussher, but there is some disagreement (Result 3.977) that "though corruption may be said to have started before, at the council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church demonstrated itself to longer practice true worship but revealed itself as a false religion."[74]

[74] I was surprised the result was not stronger given the ABCI position

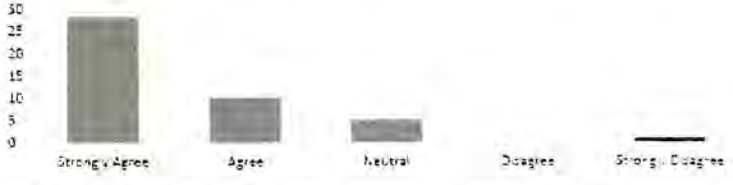


ABCI PASTORS ON APOCALYPTIC

Ussher understood the Roman Catholic Church to be a false religion that was led by the Antichrist. Here he explains how the church may appear wholesome and impressive, and yet be a false and deceptive system led by pride and engaged in idolatry. Ussher did not simply disagree with aspects of the Roman Catholic Church; rather he believed the church leadership to be the false imposter, prophesied by Scripture, which was attractive to the unsaved and thus guilty of preventing the Catholic Irish from embracing Protestantism.

The response of ABCI pastors in 2024 indicates the following:

- They generally agree with Ussher, but there is some disagreement (Result 4.456) that we are living in the last days.



- They generally feel neutral (Result 3.227) about the statement, "The Roman Catholic church is an instrument of Satan deliberately working against Irish Baptist churches across the island of Ireland"—even though Ussher strongly believed Roman Catholicism was at war with true Christianity.

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paper on ecumenism.



- They generally disagree (Result 2.227) with Ussher's view that the Pope is the man of sin (antichrist) spoken of in Scripture.



ABCI PASTORS ON PERCEIVED DEGREE OF OBSTACLE TO LOCAL CHURCH EVANGELISM

The most significant result was the first main question. Irish Baptist Pastors were asked "rank the following from 1 to 7 (1 being the most significant) obstacles to your church's local evangelism." The seven options were the following:

- Roman Catholicism
- Liberal Protestantism
- Secularism
- Islam
- Cults such as Jehovah witnesses and Mormonism
- Atheism
- Witchcraft

A score was assigned to each ranking that allowed the collective weight of concern toward each area to be assessed. This resulted in the following breakdown:

- Secularism (24%)
- Atheism (17.9%)

- Liberal Protestantism (17.1%)
- Roman Catholicism (14.8%)
- Cults (9.6%)
- Witchcraft (8.3%)
- Islam (8.2%)

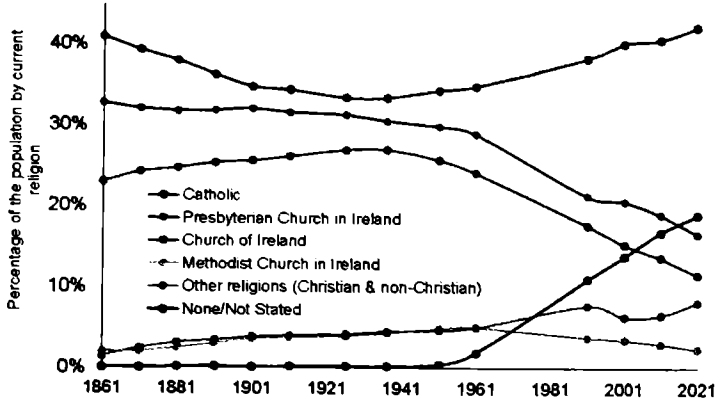


While Ussher was primarily concerned with the Counter-Reformation Roman Catholicism of his day, the perceived threat among today's Irish Baptist pastors has shifted to secularism, Atheism and Liberal Protestantism. The most recent census data for each county on the island, however, indicates this shift in concern is not in line with the majority religious identification across the island.

In the Northern Ireland 2021 census, only 17.4% of the population said they had "No religion," contrasted to 42.3% identifying as Catholic. This 42.3% is not only the largest religious group, but also marks the highest percentage identifying as Catholic in modern census records in Northern Ireland.[75]

[75] Chart and full report can be viewed at https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-religion.pdf

Figure 3: Percentage of the population by current religion (1861 - 2021)



The Republic of Ireland's 2022 census reported 69% (over 3.5 million people) living in the State identifying as Roman Catholic. The number of people who reported having "no religion" increased to 14% of the population. Further, only 3,823 people reported that they were Agnostic or Atheist which is comparably insignificant—especially when compared with the second largest religious grouping in the Republic of Ireland, Church of Ireland[76] which accounted for 124,749 people, an increase of 2% since 2016.

	ABCI Pastor Perception (%)	NI (%)	ROI (%)
Secularism	24	17.4	14
Atheism	17.9	No Data	0.0007 (3823 people)
Roman Catholicism	14.8	42.3	69

Pastors in ABCI ranked Roman Catholicism fourth after secularism, atheism and liberal Protestantism, yet the census data—

[76] Sometimes declared as Church of England, Anglican and Episcopalian in the census.

both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—indicates Roman Catholicism is still the significantly dominant religious affiliation across the island. There is a disparity between the perceived significance of this religious grouping in ABCI and the reality of the census data a fact most likely explained by many factors—including issues around a troubled history, reactions against religious distinctiveness, media etc.

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

Four hundred years after James Ussher penned *An answer to a challenge made by a Jesuite in Ireland,* the distinction he made between the Counter-Reformation system and the Reformed Protestantism of his day can be compared with the values of today's pastors in the ABCI.[77] When this is done, a similar conviction about the role and priority of Scripture may be seen to have continued, though a smaller group of Irish Baptist Pastors are not aligned with the need for modern translation due to their preference towards the Authorised Version. ABCI pastors feel neutral about the role of Patristics in doctrinal apologetics in Ireland and feel unsure of their personal knowledge and ability to make use of the Patristics. While most ABCI pastors also feel neutral about a line of doctrinal belief between Irish Baptists and the ancient Irish church, a higher number of pastors do agree God maintains a faithful remnant throughout history and believe that Trent formalized a false religious drift from orthodoxy.

The biggest change in conviction between Ussher and modern ABCI pastors was in the area of apocalyptic understanding and motivation. While this was very important for Ussher, only one ABCI pastor stated he believed that the Pope was the antichrist. Additionally, the ABCI pastors generally felt neutral about the idea

[77] This is not to minimize the distinctiveness of Ussher's 16th century Anglicanism and those of Irish Baptists today. Yet Irish Baptists normally trace their theological stream from the English Puritan culture which Ussher's Reformed Protestant theology typified.

that the Roman Catholic church was working against Irish Baptist churches (though the split result shows that strong feelings exist on both sides among the pastors). Also interesting was that despite these answers, among ABCI pastors general agreement with Ussher existed that we are living in "the last days".

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE STUDY

The analysis of James Ussher's thought about the distinctiveness between Protestant Christianity and Counter Reformation Roman Catholicism provides a means for modern evangelicals to examine where their priorities and values may have changed and as a result raises questions about the rationale of such a shift. In the context of this paper the comparison with the beliefs and perceptions of Irish Baptist pastors raises the following questions that are worth further consideration by ABCI.

- With the evangelical movement towards theological retrieval what is the role of scripture in the discussion?
- If drift from scriptural authority is common in church history how does ABCI avoid a similar pattern?
- What is lost by our increased distance from the writings and thoughts of Patristics?
- In what way has the apologetic need for a good understanding of the Patristic writings changed on the island of Ireland?
- Should a greater emphasis in Patristic studies be built into Pastoral training at the Irish Baptist College?
- What effect does a sense of discontinuity with the ancient Irish church have on us as churches and individual Christians?
- Has anything been gained or lost by our lessening focus on apocalyptic ideas?
- What relationship does apocalyptic thought have with politics or evangelistic zeal?
- With many other perceived threats to our mission in Ireland

today than simply Roman Catholicism, in what way should these shape our message and practice?

- With the vast majority of the population continuing to identify as Roman Catholic across the island today (as opposed to the non-religious), have we lost sight of an apologetic that once was seen as important?

A HISTORY OF WINDSOR BAPTIST CHURCH

TREVOR C. TAYLOR, PAUL HARRON & NIGEL YOUNGE

Windsor Baptist Church was constituted in 1931 and opened its first building in Malone Avenue, Belfast in 1934. As the church was planning to move to refurbished premises at the Majestic Building not far away on the Lisburn Road, there was a desire to tell, at least in part, the story so far of the fellowship. A book entitled *Windsor Baptist Church at Malone Avenue, Belfast 1934-2021*[1] was researched and produced. It is a record of change, blessing, and progress built on the desire for the Church of our God to grow in that area of South Belfast. The following paper is based on the book. Trevor Taylor provides Foundations, Nigel Younge, Consolidation and Expansion and finally Paul Harron concludes Expansion to the present day.

[1] Copies can be obtained by contacting the church administrator Debbie Thompson at office@windsorbaptist.org

BEGINNINGS

Windsor Baptist Church was constituted on 28 June 1931 with seven members. The first members had belonged to Great Victoria Street Baptist Church but were among a number who left because of concerns about the handling of a possible church discipline matter. They decided to form a new church in the Windsor area because there was no suitable and convenient alternative. Not many people had cars in 1931 and public transport was not as extensive.

Initially they met in St Thomas' Band Hall, a wooden building at 22 Great Northern Street which was very basic. The original pioneers were soon joined by others and there were 51 present on the opening morning service and over 70 in the evening. The membership grew and the first baptismal service was held a month later in Haypark Baptist Church.

In September 1931 a Building Committee was formed to look at the idea of building a permanent church. The Building Committee Minute Book of September 1931 to September 1933 survives! The committee was appointed to "investigate the nature of a building desired for worshipping; the seating capacity of such a building; the probable cost of same and the time necessary for its erection". Not ones to be idle, the opening page of the minute book records that the committee "was instructed to present a report to the Church four weeks from date of appointment".

By November 1932 the membership of Windsor stood at 86. During the course of 1932, there was much activity undertaken by the (expanded) building committee with a site chosen at the Lisburn Road end of Malone Avenue—75ft by 60ft at 6 shillings and 6 pence per square foot with one condition that a permanent building be erected from the start. The owner of the site was initially unwilling to sell, but having an influential estate agent among the church friends proved very useful and purchase was successfully negotiated. It was only when we came to sell the site to a developer in January 2019 it was discovered that there was a restrictive covenant which limited any sale which did not have a religious purpose. The architect chosen was Ivor Beaumont who had been the architect for Bangor

(now Hamilton Road) Baptist Church and they are very similar in design and layout, a barn-like, high-gabled, red brick hall in a simple Neo-Georgian style. The tender price was £3,175 and was agreed in August 1933.

The new building was opened on Saturday 24 March 1934 and the Baptist Union Assembly meetings were held there in May 1934.

In February 1934 four elders and nine deacons were appointed and by the end of 1934 membership had reached 100. Now that the Church had its own building the mid-week prayer meeting could be held on site on Wednesday evenings; Once a month the Wednesday meeting was a church business meeting. Most other meetings were held in the homes of members—Christian Endeavour, Women's Missionary Guild and Girls' Auxiliary. Notably, Sunday School teaching, leading activities and even singing in the choir could only be undertaken by church members. On Sundays Mr William Haggan led a Bible Study Circle, while there was a second Sunday School held at Chambers' Garage in Donegall Pass; some of the Windsor men were also responsible for a meeting on Thursday evenings in the Corporation Men's Lodging House in Matilda Street off Sandy Row.

FOUNDATIONS (1945–1968)

The first Pastor was W. F. (Fred) Rosseter, who served from 1945 to 1950.

Financial prudence during the Depression and War years meant it was definitely felt to be wrong to call a Pastor until the debt of building the church was paid off. In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, Fred Rosseter came from Scotland to become Windsor's first Pastor. His wife had the distinction of being a sister of the renowned Scottish evangelical biblical scholar and author Professor F. F. Bruce.

Pastor Rosseter took a special interest in the Christian Endeavour and he was also very keen that all should read the Bible through from beginning to end. He advised everyone to get a Revised Version in order to do so as modern speech versions were scarce and some

regarded them with suspicion.

During his time and before, work with children was a very early priority. Windsor had two Sunday Schools in its early days, one at Malone Avenue and one in premises at W. J. Chambers' garage in Donegall Pass. The statistics for 1941 showed 71 "scholars" and 6 teachers at the former with 94 and 10 at the latter. The Sunday School Union (SSU) of the Baptist Union of Ireland organised Scripture examinations and teacher training and Windsor was very involved in these activities. The Church won the coveted Gribbon Shield in 1934 and in the 1941 annual report Adele Jeffrey came fourth in the junior grade examination with 86% and Miss E. Graham and Miss W. Boyd received certificates with high commendation from the Teacher Training School. Excursions were organised for Sunday school members in very early days.

Some young people already attended Christian Endeavour at Ulsterville Presbyterian and later some people started CE in Windsor. However, the church leadership preferred that the youth work would come under the wing of Baptist Youth when that was set up, sometime in the 1950s.

The second Pastor was J. B. Craig BA, BD (1915-97) was originally from Cork and served from 1950 to 1956. John was raised in the Presbyterian church and after learning New Testament Greek in the 1940s he began working in Cavan Presbyterian in 1944 as a non-clerical assistant. Whilst there he read Alexander Carson's book *The Mode and Subjects of Baptism*, becoming convinced of believers' baptism. Later that year he was baptised by Pastor Fred Gracey in Cork Baptist Church and then started working as his assistant in 1945.

In the autumn of the same year he began a course of study at the Irish Baptist College in Dublin. He came to Windsor in 1950 and it was there he met and married Marion McIntyre. He studied for a BA and then a BD alongside his pastoral responsibilities. He was called to Ward Memorial Baptist Church in Vancouver, Canada and had three other pastorates in Canada before retirement, while also adding an MA to his studies in 1972.

John and Marion remained keenly interest in Irish Baptist life and were generous supporters of Baptist Missions and the Irish Baptist College. The John B. Craig Library in the Irish Baptist College is named after him.

Following J. B. Craig's pastorate, there was a period of three years without a pastor; however, the congregation did not stagnate. When the church was built a piece of ground had been left vacant. In 1957 a "portable hall" was erected on the site. The formal opening was performed on 30 March 1957 by the Rt Hon Ivan Neill, MP, and a write-up of the event appeared in the May 1957 edition of the Irish Baptist. It was recorded that Mrs Forbes, widow of Pastor F. H. Forbes, late Secretary of the Baptist Union and an elder of Windsor church, presented a gold key to Mr Neill so that the hall might be opened "for the extension of Christ's Kingdom on earth, that it may be the birthplace of many souls in the days that lie ahead".

The increase in accommodation provided by the new hall was particularly valuable to the Sunday School and for weekday meetings.

George F. Blayney (1922-2005) came to Windsor in March 1959, and served as Pastor until 1967.

During his time at Windsor, Pastor Blayney also lectured at the Irish Baptist College on a weekly basis, focusing on Hebrews which was one of his favourite Bible books.

George loved good hymns and was known for his ability to lead congregational singing with real competence. The hymn singing was accompanied on a harmonium, and drew largely on Sankey's Sacred Songs and Solos.

It was during Pastor Blayney's time that Billy Graham held an evangelistic rally in Windsor Park football grounds in 1966, attended by over 40,000 people. Pastor Blayney started a young people's fellowship (YPF) to nurture young people and asked other members to help. A highlight of the YPF at the time was its winning of the BYF trophy for the annual Scripture quiz, the final of which was held during the Assembly Meetings.

Pastor Blayney himself provided a brief historical account of the first thirty years of the Windsor congregation in an article in the

November 1962 edition of the Irish Baptist entitled, "A Dream Comes True".

When I was a student in 1965 my landlady was a member of Windsor and I remember bringing her to church in Malone Avenue. Little did I (Trevor) guess that that would become my spiritual home years later. The QUB accommodation officer was a Miss Haggan whose family were founder members. How the circle closes.

CONSOLIDATION AND EXPANSION (1969–2007)

In Windsor, after a two-year vacancy, and despite the troubles, which broke out at that time, a young Scottish evangelist, Gordon Cardwell, with his wife made the journey across the Irish Sea. While having worked with the Christian Brethren he was led to Baptist convictions on the pastoral office and so accepted the call. He was described as a "powerful preacher and dynamic evangelist". Unfortunately, his time at Windsor was short (2½ years) as he answered a call to the Lisburn church. Pastor Cardwell exercised a successful expository ministry in Lisburn and also Newtownards from 1981 to 1989. He then returned to Lisburn and served until retirement in 2001.

This was my (Nigel) first contact with Windsor, as a recently converted young teenager. My parents were attracted by Pastor Cardwell's powerful preaching, however they moved on when he left, but agreed to continue to leave my brother and I at the morning service primarily so I could attend George Johnston's teenage Bible class. This was started in the late 1960s and had a significant impact on my and others' spiritual growth. Also, the youth fellowship having gone through lean times was reinvigorated by James Greenwood about this time and was again an influence for good. One characteristic was a monthly joint meeting with Haypark Baptist youth as both groups were small. James and Desmond Cameron (the Haypark leader) were colleagues at Stranmillis Teacher Training College. Both George and James would go on to become influential elders in the church.

A three-year vacancy was followed by the arrival of Joshua Thompson as pastor in 1975. Secretary of the Baptist Union (now the Association) from 1952, he resigned to accept the call to Windsor. His passion was Baptist church history and he co-founded this society (the IBHS) in 1968 with Dr Harry Gribbon. His PhD thesis *Baptists in Ireland 1792–1992* was a ground breaking and unique piece of research, still much consulted. He also produced a more popular celebration of the centenary of the Baptist Union of Ireland in 1995, *A Century of Grace.* He remained involved in Union affairs contributing to the reorganisation that became the Association and was president in 1992. Joss, as he was affectionately known, was remembered as being a thought-provoking teacher with a measured delivery.

Personally, he baptised me and my memory is of him being clad in large fishing type galoshes for the event. After the baptism he was out and bone dry and in the pulpit in the space of a three-verse hymn.

He had developed significant administrative, legal and diplomatic skills as Union Secretary and one of his major achievements was overseeing the successful move of the Irish Baptist College from its Dublin base to a new home in Belfast in 1964. His 2011 obituary described him as a "wise and gracious man... [he had] a readiness to listen...set[ting] aside whatever he was doing [and listening]. Such was the Christ-like character he displayed."[2] His wife Joan is still in membership at Windsor.

The next five years were one of vacancy, however not of inactivity. A new hall replaced the 1950s wooden structure with an extended kitchen. All the usual church activities continued apace and an older member, Miss Haggan, commented in the church magazine that "Obviously it is good for a church to have a pastor. However, I tend to think that the members work well during a vacancy and certainly there is a lovely fellowship among the members."[3] 1981 was

[2] Stephen Adams, *Baptist Times,* December 2011.
[3] *Ecclesia,* October 1980.

the 50th anniversary of the founding of the church and so there was a flurry of activity. Evangelism training was given to members and 3,500 homes were visited in the area. Special evangelistic services were held with Dr Hadden Wilson (currently a member) and it was reported that two elderly ladies "trusted Christ for salvation". The whole year was busy with special evangelistic services, a young outreach, street work and the assistance of a UCCF student evangelism team. The anniversary weekend was likewise a busy time with former pastors and a guest preacher speaking.

In October 1981 the church secured the services of Roy McMullan, then OT tutor at the Irish Baptist College, for a period of "continued ministry", meaning on average three Sundays a month for 9 months.

In 1983 Roy accepted a unanimous call to the church (in fact the church called him twice one year apart). The period to 1995 under his leadership was one of much development, debate and reflection. In 1991 the church was among the first amongst Irish Baptist churches to elect women deacons. There were discussions and policies adopted on the role of women, marriage, divorce and remarriage and a comprehensive missionary policy was developed. My memory is of meeting in a member's house in Malone Avenue and using Newtownbreda Baptist Church's missionary policy (with their permission) as a starting point for ours. This led to a significant development in the number of missionaries sent and supported by the church. There is a comprehensive list in the booklet, which up to 2021 lists 49 adults, with more since. This outward focus has undoubtedly been a major source of blessing for the church. Home groups, now small groups, were started at this time of which there are now 17. The pattern of meeting two times a month continues. The QUB Baptist student chaplaincy link with Windsor, begun under Joshua Thompson, continued with Roy. One innovative aspect was a link with Chinese students and in 1982 during his period of continuous ministry, 11 were baptised on one Sunday. Roy's ministry finished in 1995 with a move to Gilnahirk part-time and as Hospice Chaplain. He continued in membership at Windsor and

served as an elder for a period. He died in 2015. His obituary noted that he was "a great encourager as well as a friend, a pastor and sympathetic advisor to everyone he met".[4] His wife Diane is still in membership.

With little or no vacancy David McMillan came to Windsor having been the Newry church pastor from 1983–1993. He was deeply challenged about equipping Christians to think biblically about witness and peacebuilding in the context of conflict through his involvement with ECONI (Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland). His twelve years was a period of constructive and dynamic growth. In 1995–1996 there was an examination of the mission of the church. In David's own words "[t]he most significant elements of that review were not the changes to the church programme...but three fundamental decisions."[5] These were firstly to remain in the immediate vicinity and not to move to the outskirts of the city, then secondly, given the transient nature of the community, to be a place of nurture and influence for those there for a limited time. The third decision was to be willing "to give the church away". To recognise that the church belongs to Jesus and not to us. Out of this process came the vision "Seeking to be a church without walls with the four aspects of belonging, multiplying, serving and going".

During David's time various new initiatives such as "Help my Unbelief"—a series of apologetic talks—Christianity Explored, Sermon Workshop and a practical community project "Chasing the Wind", which became "How can we love you?" were started. The church also took its first steps in extending the paid pastoral team. Gordon Darragh became associate in 2000 to 2003 and then Roy Gamble 2005 to 2013, with Gordon returning to the post in 2014 to the present.

If we look at membership at Windsor from 1934 to 2023, starting from 7 founding members, numbers quickly grew to 100 and

[4] J Greenwood, *ABC Insight,* June-July 2015.
[5] *Windsor Baptist Church at Malone Avenue,* p. 26.

oscillated around that until the 1960s and George Blayney's pastorate when in 1967 membership climbed to 131. Then numbers decreased, suffering from the effect of the troubles and the movement of many long-term residents away from the Lisburn Road area. Some commuted a distance to Windsor mainly from the Lisburn direction and East Belfast. Numbers only returned to over 130 in 2001 during David McMillan's time. There seem to have been a number of factors (some of which have already been mentioned) which enabled this. A clear vison, an increase in the eldership (growing from 3 to 7, currently 9), the missionary focus, clarity on a set of church policies, the input from a larger staff team and the growing benefit of small groups. The growth has continued and 2023 figures showed membership at 269.

David and his wife Dorothy became part of the Windsor missionary family when he left the pastorate in 2007, ministering in theological education in Europe. Now retired they are still in membership. David commented that "[t]he generosity of those who have been members for many years in opening their hearts to new people was critical in helping Windsor become the church it is today."[6]

EXPANSION

The church Windsor is today has been further shaped by the "servant ministry" and collaborative approach to leadership modelled by the eighth and current pastor, David Dunlop, who took up the pastorate in December 2008. David's original career had been as an Insurance Broker but active youth work in Ballynahinch Baptist, alongside his wife Glenys (known as "Glen"), led to youth ministry training in London and service at Hornchurch Baptist Church in Essex followed by Postgraduate Diploma training at the Irish Bible Institute. David and Glen both worked as the youth pastoral team in Ballynahinch for 13 years, with David becoming associate pastor at Ballynahinch for the last five of those years.

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[6] *Windsor Baptist Church at Malone Avenue*, p. 27.

David built up a strong teaching ministry at Windsor which continues. He has also fostered a team approach with staff colleagues, elders and members, with morning and evening services led by different church members and deploying increasing congregational participation. The worship is enhanced by a vibrant praise group, made up of rotating musicians and singers, with which Glen has also been highly involved over the years.

In addition to Gordon Darragh's associate pastorship since 2014 already mentioned—which has been notable for its focus on committed pastoral care provision and the development of visible prayer ministry—Windsor appointed a Youth Worker in 2010. Mark Houston took up that post with energy, and in 2013 he was appointed as a Youth Pastor and joined the team of elders; he continues in the role, continually adapting and responding to the needs of young people growing up in a challenging and rapidly changing world.

Mark brought great imagination and enthusiasm to the youth work of the church, rebranding Sunday Bible class as "Transit" and Friday evenings as "Fuse"; the former youth fellowship had already become known as "CLAY" (reflecting the desire to be moulded by the Heavenly Potter). In 2011, the Family Centre portacabin building (which had been acquired from Moira Baptist in 1996) situated within the church car park was renamed The Cabin and became for several years a well-loved socialising and teaching/discipleship space for teenagers. In 2012 new teams with an extensive band of leaders were established to nurture a thriving Junior Church programme on Sundays running alongside morning gatherings.

Over the years, church attendance grew significantly, so that the Malone Avenue building was under great pressure to accommodate those meeting for worship as well as the children's and youth activities which utilised the adjoining church hall rooms, The Cabin, and the ground floor of the church-owned house at 14 Windsor Avenue.

With continued expansion and many children attending, the decision was made to appoint a Children's Worker. Julieanne

Ashfield took up this post in January 2018 on a part-time basis and proved to be incredibly creative and dynamic, building the provision and Junior Church curriculum for primary-aged children and instigating a new stream for pre-Junior Church tots called "Joyful Noise". There was also a busy crèche and weekday activities included Parent & Toddler groups which had been running since the mid-1980s and which have become increasingly busy, multicultural and diverse.

The church's children's and youth work has increased in its vitality over the years with "Friday Night Shine" get-togethers for teenagers and a lively summer holiday Bible Club week called "Shine" which engages widely with children from across the local community as well as children of families attending the church regularly. Holiday summer schemes for primary-school-aged children had begun in 1993 and continued till 1998; however, after a break in delivery, they resumed again in 2010, based in the local Primary School, Fane Street, and have been held yearly ever since. Like Parents & Toddlers, this outreach is increasingly multicultural and diverse in nature reflecting the character of the local population. Additional activities for teenagers and parents were built on to the Shine programme from 2015 onwards and new initiatives continue to be added, now even including an outreach programme in Donegal working with local churches in the Dunfanaghy area.

We should also note that Windsor has been blessed to have had a number of Pastoral Assistants over recent decades who have each brought talents and strengths, and more recently Intern Assistants have augmented the staff teams, working across areas including children and young people. Currently, we have two such gifted people, Niall Moore and Sarah Foster.

The pressure of numbers on the Malone Avenue site was a challenge from the early 2000s. In 2001, a development team had determined that the membership overwhelmingly wanted to remain in the vicinity of the Lisburn Road. During the 2000s there were plans to develop the Malone Avenue site with a joint purchase with Praxis Care of the former South Eastern Education and Library

Board offices in Windsor Avenue in 2002 and the purchase of a day-nursery premises at 14 Windsor Ave in 2003.

Plans for a new church building were progressed from 2006 with a revised scheme eventually approved in 2012; however, protracted negotiations around the demolition of the rear of the jointly owned No. 18 building remained unresolved by 2014 and plans which had been developed by then were considered insufficient to meet the needs of continued numerical growth. The decision was made for a Building Project Team to try to identify alternative development opportunities within the locality and in December 2014 the elders instigated a "40 Days of Prayer" for the members and congregation to seek God's guidance on the future work of the church including the development project, running alongside teaching around and praying through the book of Nehemiah. Many found this a time of closeness to God and sensing the palpable work of the Holy Spirit.

During the period of prayer, in January 2015, the former Majestic Cinema on the front of the Lisburn Road, by then a vacant furniture showroom premises, came on the market and, extraordinarily, the church swiftly agreed to proceed with its purchase with the sale agreed in March and completion by June. In a few short months, after almost 14 years of desiring a Lisburn Road location, God had provided just that, a stone's throw from the original building in Malone Avenue.

Around this time, the Sunday morning gatherings could not safely continue in the Malone Avenue building, so an arrangement was made with Fane Street Primary School, with which the church had developed close ties through Shine and other community-facing and pastoral connections, so that morning services could be held in its assembly hall—this arrangement continued for almost four years and proved helpful in making greater community connections and breaking down barriers in line with being "a church without walls".

While not in its original state, having lost many of its interior features and having been delisted, nonetheless the Majestic Cinema is a significant Art Deco landmark in the area having been designed by the renowned John (Jack) McBride Neil, dating back to 1935–6.

Architectural historian Dr Paul Larmour features it prominently in his book *Architects of Ulster 1920s-1970s* remarking on its cream facade, entrance bay and long horizontal windows.

At the outset, the membership decided that the Majestic should be refurbished as a church rather than demolished and rebuilt. The Belfast Telegraph noted in September 2016, "Where once people congregated to pay homage to gods of the silver screen, new audiences will gather to give thanks to an even greater deity. Windsor Baptist Church is to be congratulated for saving what was once a fine example of an Art Deco building."

Briefs were prepared, aided by highly committed and experienced church members with appropriate knowledge and expertise, to convert the Majestic into a church building and to sell the Malone Avenue building and site for apartment development. Hall Black Douglas Architects were appointed as the new design team for the conversion of the Majestic. The membership approved the development at a cost of £3 million in September 2016; however, various delays relating to complex issues including planning permission and sale of the Malone Avenue and Windsor Avenue properties did require great faith, perseverance and patience to resolve. By February 2019, Cleary Contracts were appointed as the main contractor to commence the building of the Majestic, now with a budget of £3.55 million; however, the Covid–19 pandemic with lockdowns and some cessations of building work, along with variations in costs of materials and some additional fixtures and fittings added to the project, meant that the budget rose to £3.9 million which the membership approved in June 2020.

A number of successful fundraising initiatives were undertaken along with dedicated, long-term giving pledges by many members, and so it was a joy in early 2021 when the congregation was able to meet in the new building and begin to use its auditorium and superb integrated youth, children's and community facilities. After 87 years at Malone Avenue, the Windsor church fellowship continued its presence and witness in the area with a renewed sense of purpose in a building whose name reflected the majesty of our Lord and

Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The eagle-eyed among you will notice that the striking facade now subtly integrates the outline of a large cross on the left-hand side wall—so even if the name of the building doesn't immediately resonate for passers-by, a glance upwards will pique interest as to its purpose and function.

One of those deeply involved in the Majestic development project, John McCormick, recalls the following points about the process of moving from Malone Avenue to the Majestic Building. He notes that the Forty Days of Prayer in December 2015 was an important milestone, seeking promptings from God about the way ahead, after years of frustrating delays on the ideas for development of the Malone Avenue site. The perseverance and unity from the church leadership and also church members was palpable as the project progressed with many "twists and turns". Practically speaking, there was an opportunity to obtain competitive tenders in 2018, with substantial completion of the works in advance of significant increases in material costs and interest rates and there was a harmonious working relationship between the contractor (Clearys) and the professional team, with an "open-book" approach to costs for the variations which were inevitably part of working in an older building.

Financially, it is important to record support from the Directors of ABCI in offering guarantees on the necessary bank loans. A loan of c. £2 million was required, after allowances for development fund monies at the time and also the capital value of the existing site. This is currently reduced to c. £1.3 million and church members have been generous in pledging support to repay the loan over a 15 year period, in addition to meeting the ongoing ministry costs. Bank loans were negotiated in tranches at fixed interest rates for defined periods, which was advantageous in advance of the turbulence in the markets in late 2022. Overall, there was and is very much a general sense of moving forward, looking to God to supply our needs. In April 2024, the old Malone Avenue building came down and redevelopment of the site there began, truly passing from one era to another.

Since moving into the Majestic, and as gathering together in person has resumed post the pandemic, it is fair to say that the Windsor fellowship has moved into a very different and even livelier new era. South Belfast, with its hospitals, schools, colleges and universities close by, along with a large number of people coming to live in the area from right across the world, including some asylum seekers and refugees, creates a hugely socio-economically diverse, multicultural and cosmopolitan population. It has been a distinct blessing that this diversity of background as well as age groups is reflected in our gatherings and activities—it feels like a foretaste of heaven to come together to praise and worship God collectively as people of many backgrounds, races and languages. Morning gatherings currently typically number 400 people.

With the diversity of local population come additional challenges and opportunities to help support people and so in 2023 the membership agreed to appoint a further member of staff as a Community Worker. Kerry Fee who has considerable expertise in the field was appointed to take on this co-ordinating task, drawing on volunteering of time and energies from many among the church's membership in numerous activities such as language and maths support classes. There are also well-established connections with other groups in the area like International Meeting Point and charities such as Storehouse.

The new building is heavily used for various purposes, and as a reflection of that, a part-time Church Administrator was appointed in 2021, Debbie Thompson. One of the characteristics of the Windsor membership and leadership has been the willingness to make staff appointments when they are needed. It should also be noted that the church's diaconate is kept very busy, alongside many volunteers serving in various ministries.

Windsor continues to play an active interest in the life of the Association of Baptist Churches and over the years has also enjoyed deep connections with the life of the Irish Baptist College, through both staff members and full- and part-time students (myself, Paul,

and Nigel included!). Like you, we are committed to partnership in the gospel, and we are thankful to God to have had the opportunity to witness to His love, mercy and grace for us, in the locality of the Lisburn Road over almost a century, and now facing into a new era with faith and trust.

A REVIEW OF RECENT LITERATURE

DAVID LUKE

Gavin Ortlund, *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church*. Zondervan, 2024.

Douglas Sweeney, *The Substance of Our Faith: Foundations for the History of Christian Doctrine*. Baker Academic, 2023.

Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, *Priests of History: Stewarding the Past in an Ahistoric Age*. Zondervan, 2024.

Samuel G. Parkison, *To Gaze Upon God: The Beatific Vision in Doctrine, Tradition and Practice*. IVP Academic, 2024.

It has become increasingly clear to many thoughtful people in recent years that, like it or not (and many do not), the Western world has been shaped by Christianity. Many of the values that society espouses and cherishes are not products of liberal humanism but of our Christian heritage. One of the many ways that Christianity has

shaped our world is how we think about history. While the ancients thought that history was cyclical, Christianity taught that it was linear. History is moving towards an end goal. History is something, therefore, with which Christians have always sought to come to terms. Yet, the question of how Christians understand history and how we relate to the past is a complicated one, dating back to the early centuries of the Church's existence. The issue is addressed in some recent books which help readers to reflect upon our relationship with the Christian past.

Baptist pastor Gavin Ortlund is a leading voice in the theological retrieval movement in the USA (although it is perhaps too much to describe it as a movement). Theological retrieval is an attempt, by some scholars, to tackle the rootlessness of much contemporary Evangelicalism. Many see the increasingly diverse modern Evangelical movement as governed by sheer pragmatism, with many churches simply bending with each prevailing wind of the culture. This is evident in many of the trends that have captured the imagination of Evangelicals in the last forty years or so. As a result of the flux in Evangelicalism, caused by its apparent faddishness, many have been attracted to Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, which seem to offer a sense of stability rooted in historical continuity. In *What It Means to Be Protestant* Ortlund notes that consequently "there is currently an enormous amount of interest in church history." Do these other communions offer greater stability, continuity and faithfulness than Evangelicalism?

For Ortlund the problem for Evangelicals is that they are attracted to other churches because they do not know their history. In saying this, he is less concerned about knowing the history of the events surrounding the emergence of Protestantism, than he is with understanding the issues that were at stake. He argues Protestantism was not a new movement but a renewal movement that looked not only to the Bible but also to the early church as a source which helped to direct it. For Protestants they were the ones who had an ancient historical pedigree in their understanding of the Christian faith, not the Catholic Church whose supposed traditions were

mostly medieval innovations. As Ortlund notes, "To be 'deep in history' was the whole rationale for Protestantism."

Ortlund helps the reader to understand key Protestant ideas such as *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, by moving them beyond popular slogans and explaining their historical significance. He also examines the nature of the true church and how it cannot be contained within a single institution. He looks too at the question of authority and especially that of papal authority. The idea of a magisterium defining doctrine in an age of conflicting voices has been appealing for some today. Ortlund, however, shows that the institution of the papacy is found neither in the New Testament or the early centuries of the church.

In the final section of the book he seeks to show how the early Reformers saw themselves as reforming a corrupted church, rather than creating a new movement. They believed that they were in continuity with the New Testament church and the Early Church Fathers. He seeks to demonstrate that they saw the Catholic and Orthodox Churches as having gathered many accretions along the way, which effectively had gained authority through repetition. As such many of these ideas and practices are effectively placed beyond reform. To be truly Protestant, he argues, is to stand in the pathway of true catholicity because it opens up the possibility of reform according to Scripture and not loyalty to institutional norms.

Douglas Sweeney is an American church historian and a leading authority in the field of Jonathan Edwards studies. *The Substance of Our Faith* is the first instalment of a two-part work on the history of Christian doctrine. His contention is that very few Christians today understand the substance of the Christian faith. This doctrinal deficit diminishes our worship, our discipleship and our witness in the world. His aim in this two volume work is to restore our grasp of doctrine to equip us to grow in spiritual maturity.

As the subtitle of the book suggests this first volume is a prefatory work which seeks to lay the ground for the more substantial work that is to follow. The first section of the book offers a survey of how the church has understood the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding it relative to the authority of Scripture and tradition.

The second section is intriguing as he seeks to set out the thesis that the church had initially been global in its outlook, accounting for around twenty percent of the world's population c.500 AD. It shrank in the Middle Ages to the European periphery, before the advent of modern missions in the late eighteenth century. This resurgence of mission has led to the growth of the church in the "global south" which is now the centre of world Christianity. This, as he notes, provides challenges about how we think about doctrine and how we contextualise the faith without domesticating it.

The third section deals with the question of how doctrine is formulated. He examines this issue from the perspectives of Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. The answer is complicated and it is also important. This is because, as Sweeney writes, "it has *everything* to do with the love of God and neighbor ... everything to do with the tenor and trajectory of daily discipleship." Right beliefs should inform right practice. The final section of the book then considers how churches might engage practically not only with Scripture but with the whole Christian tradition to help the whole family of God.

While Sweeney might sound like another voice in the retrieval movement, he identifies himself as "*evangelical* and *catholic*." For him this means embracing a wider view of the past than retrievalists and passing on its traditions, while being sensitive to new cultural contexts. His second volume will no doubt cast light on what this means.

Sarah Irving-Stonebraker's *Priests of History* does not set itself ideologically in either the retrieval or evangelical-catholic trajectories. While she would no doubt find some sympathy for both, her central argument is that we are living in "an ahistoric age." Irving-Stonebraker is an Australian university professor of history who became a Christian from an atheist background and is now a member of an Anglican church. While she recognises its deep roots in modernity, she sees this *ahistoric age* as beginning around 2010 with the digital revolution and the rise of social media. This era is characterised by three broad attitudes to the past: "*irrelevance,*

ignorance, and *ideology*." The *ahistoric* mindset permeates not only wider Western culture but also the Western church. Like Ortlund and Sweeney, Irving-Stonebraker thinks that as Christians we need to reconnect with our historical roots.

She builds on the idea of Robert Boyle (1627–1691) who said that the role of scientists was to be "priests of nature." She maintains that we ought to be "priests of history" whose calling is to keep and watch over the past by passing down historical knowledge and Christian heritage. Although, she tries to ground this idea in the biblical idea of priesthood, it does appear to be rather a stretch. Irving-Stonebraker then gives some examples of this by recounting the stories of some overlooked Christians which upsets the popular historical narrative of oppressive Christianity. She also considers how understanding the past helps us to engage in a deeper dialogue with the prevailing culture.

The final section of the book considers how the study of history can help us in the present age. Here she deals with historic figures who can help us to be better stewards of time, have a growing appreciation of the sacred and the beautiful and develop our intellectual and spiritual formation. At one point she writes, "I am not advocating a simple formula that says, 'return to all things 'high church.'" Yet, from the examples that she offers—such as sacred space, the Book of Common Prayer, "books of hours"—it is difficult not to conclude that this is the direction she is suggesting.

If the other authors raise questions about how we engage with Christian history Samuel Parkison, a lecturer in theological studies in the United Arab Emirates, practices that engagement in *To Gaze Upon God,* where he considers the beatific vision—that the hope of heaven is that we will have a blessed vision of God. This, he suggests, is a concept that is at the heart of biblical eschatology and has been of central interest in the history of the church. At present, however, it has been marginalised as there has been increasing pressure on the church to address the pressing practical questions of the age, notably around sexuality and the nature of humanity.

Parkison begins his work with a survey of the biblical foundations

for the idea of the beatific vision. He considers how it is anticipated in the Old Testament and made more explicit in the New Testament, in passages such as 1 John 3:2 and Revelation 22:3–5. The bulk of the book is then taken up exploring how different theologians have explored the subject from the early centuries of the church through to the post-Reformation period. This allows the reader to benefit from the richness of Christian thinking on this subject and, as Parkison notes, to realise that previous generations have already wrestled with many of the questions that might occur to us. Some readers may, however, find the focus on some of these discussions a little abstruse, for example, to what extent did John Owen's theology modify that of Thomas Aquinas?

One of the great strengths of the book is, that despite exploring some of the complex historical issues, Parkison is keen to show that recovering a focus upon the beatific vision is essentially practical. As he points out he does not want to suggest it is practical in the sense that it is relevant to some everyday pursuit. Rather, if the beatific vision is the ultimate goal of the Christian life, then it is intrinsically relevant. He writes it is because "all other pursuits and concerns, therefore, rightly orbit around" it. He then explores how this has an impact on key elements of the Christian life such as prayer and missions. For Parkison history has a final aim and for Christians it is a glorious one, where even now we have foretaste of the age to come.

All these books point to the necessity of rootless Evangelicalism connecting with its historic sources. Ortlund suggests that this is needed to correct the view that it is a late comer to Christian history and it is, therefore, a less plausible expression of the faith. He points out that Protestantism's heartbeat has always been a return to biblical Christianity as practised in the early centuries. Sweeney encourages Evangelicals to recover the breadth of the Christian tradition and consider the implications of this for the age of global Christianity. Irving-Stonebraker calls us to be conservators, so that Christian stories and practices will be protected. In turn, she thinks that this will help Christians engage with the *ahistoric* age. Parkison provides a worked example of what the others advocate. As he does so he

provides an inspirational volume on the recovery of the beatific vision among Evangelicals. Each of these books remind us of a Christian heritage that spans 2000 years which, when we engage with it, serves as rich resource for the contemporary church.

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