Wem Baptist Church

WHAT WE BELIEVE

The core of what we believe as a church is summarised in our **Basis of Faith**.

Our teaching and practice is also guided by a number of **Doctrinal Distinctives**.

Basis of Faith

1. God
There is one God, who exists eternally in three distinct but equal persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is unchangeable in his holiness, justice, wisdom and love. He is the almighty Creator; Saviour and Judge who sustains and governs all things according to his sovereign will for his own glory.

2. The Bible
God has revealed himself in the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments alone. Every word was inspired by God through human authors, so that the Bible as originally given is in its entirety the Word of God, without error and fully reliable in fact and doctrine. The Bible alone speaks with final authority and is always sufficient for all matters of belief and practice.

3. Humanity
All men and women, being created in the image of God, have inherent and equal dignity and worth. Their greatest purpose is to obey, worship and love God. God created us male and female, which is identified by our biological sex. Marriage is the exclusive union of one man and one woman and is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his bride the church. Sexual intimacy is a gift from God to be enjoyed only within the context of marriage.

4. The Fall
As a result of the fall of our first parents, every aspect of human nature has been corrupted and all men and women are without spiritual life, guilty sinners and hostile to God. Every person is therefore under the just condemnation of God and needs to be born again, forgiven and reconciled to God in order to know and please him.

5. The Lord Jesus Christ
The Lord Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, and lived a sinless life in obedience to the Father. He taught with authority and all his words are true. On the cross he died in the place of sinners, bearing God's punishment for their sin, redeeming them by his blood. He rose from the dead and in his resurrection body ascended into heaven where he is exalted as Lord of all. He intercedes for his people in the presence of the Father.

6. Salvation
Salvation is entirely a work of God's grace and cannot be earned or deserved. It has been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ and is offered to all in the gospel. God in his love forgives sinners whom he calls, granting them repentance and faith. All who believe in Christ are justified by faith alone, adopted into the family of God and receive eternal life.

7. The Holy Spirit
The Holy Spirit has been sent from heaven to glorify Christ and to apply his work of salvation. He convicts sinners, imparts spiritual life and gives a true understanding of the Scriptures. He indwells all believers, brings assurance of salvation and produces increasing likeness to Christ. He builds up the Church and empowers its members for worship, service and mission.

8. The Church
The universal Church is the body of which Christ is the head and to which all who are saved belong. It is made visible in local churches, which are congregations of believers who are committed to each other for the worship of God, the preaching of the Word, the administering of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; for pastoral care and discipline, and for evangelism. The unity of the body of Christ is expressed within and between churches by mutual love, care and encouragement. True fellowship between churches exists only where they are faithful to the gospel.

9. Baptism and the Lord's Supper
Baptism and the Lord's Supper have been given to the churches by Christ as visible signs of the gospel. Baptism is a symbol of union with Christ and entry into his Church but does not impart spiritual life. The Lord's Supper is a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice offered once for all and involves no change in the bread and wine. All its blessings are received by faith.

10. The Future
The Lord Jesus Christ will return in glory. He will raise the dead and judge the world in righteousness. The wicked will be sent to eternal punishment and the righteous will be welcomed into a life of eternal joy in fellowship with God. God will make all things new and will be glorified forever.

Doctrinal Distinctives

Our Basis of Faith defines our core gospel beliefs as a church. All members are required to affirm their agreement with that statement.

Additionally, the elders of Wem Baptist Church are required to affirm a number of Doctrinal Distinctives which define the teaching and practice of the church. Individual members are not required to hold to these Doctrinal Distinctives but must accept that these are the views of Wem Baptist Church and agree to not undermine them.

The Doctrinal Distinctives are:

- the FIEC Ethos Statement on Gospel Unity
- the FIEC Ethos Statement on Women in Ministry
- the FIEC Ethos Statement on Same Sex Marriage *
- the following statement on Baptism *

** Topics with an asterisk are also covered briefly in our Basis of Faith, which members are required to affirm.*

Baptism

What is baptism?
Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is an outward sign which marks a person's regeneration and entry into the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. It does not impart spiritual life but is an external symbol of an internal reality. It represents a person being washed clean of their sin (Acts 22:16), and united with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5).

It is an expression of repentance (Acts 2:38), faith in Christ (Acts 2:41; Colossians 2:12) and a commitment to be a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20).

How should baptism be administered?
The word 'baptism' literally means to 'dip or plunge'. As such, baptism should, wherever possible, be administered by immersion in water. This symbolises burial with Christ and rising with him to newness of life. In unusual circumstances, baptism could be administered by sprinkling or pouring water over a person's head.

Our usual practice is for the Pastor or an elder to administer the baptism as part of a church service. However, the method, location or person conducting the baptism neither adds to nor diminishes the significance of the baptism.

As a public declaration of allegiance to Christ, our usual practice is for the person being baptised to answer some simple questions to indicate their personal repentance and faith, as well as give their testimony in some form.

Who should be baptised?
Since baptism is a sign of being a Christian, it should only be given to those who repent of their sin and profess faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We encourage all who trust in Jesus to be baptised, in obedience to Christ's command. It is a sign of having entered into the kingdom, not a mark of reaching maturity. Therefore anyone with a credible profession of faith may be baptised. This should normally happen soon after a person's conversion.

What about other views of baptism?
Throughout church history, Christians have disagreed about the proper recipients of baptism. They have not always disagreed well. Whilst we may not be able to agree, we are determined to disagree in principled and godly ways.

The views outlined in this document might be described as Believers' Baptism or credobaptism. However, Christians from other traditions (such as Anglicans or Presbyterians) argue that baptism ought to be administered not only to new converts but also to the children of believers, much like circumcision was in the old covenant. This position might be referred to as Infant Baptism or paedobaptism.

Some paedobaptists place great significance on their confirmation, a service where a believer publicly confirms their faith is in Jesus now that they are old enough to understand it. They consider that this plus their infant baptism is equivalent to believer's baptism.

This is not our position. However, since baptism is not required for salvation, the credo/paedobaptist debate ought to be seen as secondary issue; a subject on which Christians can legitimately disagree, whilst still recognising one another as brothers and sisters. Whilst we only teach and practise credobaptism, we acknowledge that many paedobaptists are sincere and genuine Christians.

Some paedobaptists, however, suggest that baptism imparts spiritual life to those being baptised, a view called 'baptismal regeneration'. We reject this view in our Basis of Faith, since it undermines the gospel and so becomes a primary issue. Salvation is entirely by grace, received through faith in Christ, not through any outward action, including baptism.

How does baptism relate to membership at Wem Baptist Church?
Membership of Wem Baptist Church is open to all who have a credible profession of faith in Christ, as defined by our Basis of Faith. Whilst we require members to agree with the Basis of Faith, we do not require full theological agreement on other issues, including baptism.

Every local church needs to have a stance on the issue of baptism, since they either will or will not baptise infants. But this need not exclude people from membership so long as the church's stance is respected and upheld.

Potential members fall into 3 possible groups:

- Those who have received a believer's baptism. Provided that they meet the other criteria, they would be eligible for membership.

- Those who have not been baptised, either as a believer or an infant. We would require them to be baptised before considering them for membership.

- Those who have received an infant baptism and not a believer's baptism. We would encourage them to be baptised as believers. We recognise that they might not feel able to do this in good conscience, believing that they are already baptised. In such instances, at the discretion of the elders, we would respect their conscience even though we differ, and accept that they are seeking to obey the Lord in line with their understanding of his Word. Provided that they meet the other criteria, they would be eligible for membership.

Gospel Unity

Introduction
The FIEC was founded in 1922 with the purpose of expressing visible unity between churches on a non-sectarian basis. The FIEC has therefore always been a fellowship of churches which rejoices in our unity in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we may differ with one another on a number of matters not essential to salvation, we strive to maintain the unity we enjoy together in Christ. We also seek to express Christian fellowship with other Gospel churches and para-church groups outside FIEC.

Our commitment to the Gospel means that we are unable to express Christian fellowship with those who cannot affirm the fundamental truths of the faith.

God's Purpose of Unity
From the very beginning of creation God's purpose was that the entire human race would be united in fellowship under his good rule of love and blessing. Tragically ever since Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden, sinful humanity has been characterised not only by alienation from God but also by broken relationships, suspicion and division from one another. However God, in his great grace, purposed to save a people for himself out of the broken community of this sinful world, and to build a new humanity united as a single body.

The ultimate fulfilment of this vision is the single people united in worship before the throne of God in glory (Rev 7:9). This unity of God's people is effected through the saving work of Christ on the Cross. Through him both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God:

"…His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross… For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." (Eph 2:15-18 NIV)

The whole church is to be built up "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ." (Eph 4:13 NIV). This is part of God's cosmic purpose "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Eph 1:10); indeed all things are to be reconciled in him:

"For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Col 1:19-20 NIV)

Christian unity is therefore at the heart of the purposes of God.

Unity in the Gospel

Christian unity is established through the Gospel. It is through this message that we are saved and united to Christ (1Cor 15:1-2, Rom 1:16, Eph 1:13). When the Lord Jesus prays for unity, it is amongst those who receive the Gospel (John 17:20). Some say that we are united as believers by our experience of the Holy Spirit. This is true, but it would be wrong to set the Holy Spirit in opposition to the Gospel. We receive the Spirit through the Gospel (Gal 3:2, Eph 1:13). It is the Spirit who gives us new birth (John 3:5-8), but he brings this new life through the Word (Jam 1:18, 1 Pet 1:23). If we have a real experience of the Holy Spirit, then we will find that he deepens our understanding and appreciation of Christ, and his Word (1Cor 2:9-16). When we work and cooperate together, it is in the cause of the Gospel (Phil 1:27).

This truth finds practical expression within FIEC by the prominence that we give to the essential truths of the faith. If we are to find common cause with other believers, it will be partnership on the basis of a shared commitment to the Gospel. This will be expressed by a shared doctrinal basis.

Rejection of False Teachers

Whilst we long to enjoy unity with all who profess the name of Christ, the New Testament warns repeatedly of false teachers and false prophets coming into the church. Whilst such false teachers profess to know Christ as Lord, and appear as brothers, they are in reality wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt 7:15, Acts 20:29-31). In twisting or distorting the Gospel they rob us of our message for the lost, and instead of building up believers in the truth lead them astray to spiritual ruin (Col 2:18-19, Rev 2:20-23). Elders are charged with the primary responsibility of guarding the flock against such malign influences, and we are commanded to reject them and remain separate from them (Rom 16:17, Gal 1:8-9, 5:12, Phil 3:2, 2 Pet 2:1-22, 2 John 1:9-10, Jude 1:1-25).

These New Testament teachings require us to stand apart from those who would deny the core truths of the gospel, whether implicitly or expressly.

It is important to understand the pastoral motivation of Jesus and the apostles in warning against false teachers. Matters of spiritual life and death are at stake if these false brothers are accepted and their deviant doctrines embraced. We are therefore obligated by love to stand apart from them, both for the sake of the church and its witness to Christ, and also for the sake of such false teachers themselves, as we would long for them to come to repentance and true saving faith.

Summary of Implications for the FIEC

Jesus prayed for the unity of his people, and this is an essential element of our witness (John 17:23). We are urged to maintain spiritual unity, in the face of differences of belief and practice which are not essential to the Gospel. Our commitment to unity extends not only within FIEC, but to all who are united to Christ in a variety of church and para-church groups. We look forward to the day when all of God's people will be united before him in glory.

This spiritual unity is to be expressed amongst all who confess the truth of the Gospel. It is through the Gospel that we are saved, and built up in the faith. Jesus' prayer for unity was for those who would believe in him through the message preached by the apostles (John 17:20). Our Doctrinal Basis affirms that true fellowship between churches exists only where they are faithful to the gospel. The gospel of salvation by grace is so precious to us that we desire to stand together with all who believe and preach it.

For the same reason, we cannot express Christian fellowship with those who reject it. The New Testament warns us repeatedly to guard the church against the influence of false teachers who deny the truth. Therefore we cannot join in partnership in evangelism or activities of Christian fellowship with those who are unable to affirm the essential doctrines of the faith as expressed in the FIEC Doctrinal Basis and similar statements.

We are unable to affiliate formally to groups such as Churches Together which exist to express unity between churches naming Jesus as Lord, but without concern as to whether they hold to the core doctrines of the gospel as expressed in our Doctrinal Basis.

There are many opportunities for us to find common cause with others (both inside and outside the professing church), if these do not compromise our distinctive testimony to the Gospel. For example, we may be able to speak together on moral issues, in defence of our religious

liberties, or to work together in acts of practical charity and compassion. Such activities are at the discretion of local church leaders.

Women In Ministry

Introduction
When the FIEC came into being in 1922, the issue of women in ministry would not have been particularly contentious. The consensus within independent evangelical churches was that the role of pastor and elder was open only to suitably qualified men. Whilst mainline denominations and other Christian groupings have shifted from this position, it is our conviction that the traditional view is in line with Scripture. At the same time, we also want to affirm that women have a very significant place in the ministry of our churches – not only, as has always been the case, in such areas as care and hospitality, but also in terms of teaching.

Gender
God created us male and female, and calls us to live according to our gender identity which is inseparable from our biological sex determined at conception. Our gender may not be changed or reassigned.

Joint heirs in salvation
Before examining the biblical data which address the issue of women in ministry it is essential that we reaffirm the equality men and women have in creation and redemption. Both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Both men and women receive the Holy Spirit and are heirs with Christ. We are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-29). Women as well as men belong to the body of Christ and their service and gifts are essential for the proper functioning of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7). It is within this context that discussion about the role of women in the church takes place.

Complementary in ministry
At the creation God stated that it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Men and women are to work together in partnership both in the family and the church. There are, however, distinctions in the roles. The biblical texts which speak directly of the roles of men and women in Christian ministry have attracted much attention over the last few years. It is our conviction that, although some of the details may be debated, the essential thrust of these passages is clear:

1 Timothy 2 and 3
Timothy was charged with bringing order to the dysfunctional Ephesian church (1 Tim 3:14-15). There had been problems within the leadership of the church (e.g. 1 Tim 5:19-20), and a key aspect of Timothy's role was to

make sure the church in Ephesus had suitably qualified elders (1 Tim 3:1-7). The qualifications assume that the elders will be men (1 Tim 3:2). This should not surprise us given that he makes it clear in the immediately preceding context that men, and not women, were to do the authoritative teaching (1 Tim 2:11-15).

1 Corinthians 11 and 14

At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which assumes that women will pray and prophesy, and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 which commands that women be silent in the church gathering. However one seeks to resolve this tension, it is clear that restrictions of some kind are being placed upon women.

In 1 Corinthians 11, whilst Paul reminds us of the interdependence of men and women, he also makes it clear that issues of authority are at stake: man is the head of woman. The section in 1 Corinthians 14 also indicates that the women do not have the same freedom to speak in the gathering as the gifted men.

Creation

Paul roots both the prohibition of 1 Timothy 2, and his comments in 1 Corinthians 11, in creation (1 Tim 2:13-14; 1 Cor 11:8-9). These commands are therefore driven neither by culture, nor by a particular crisis in the church; rather, they are deeply rooted in who we are as creatures.

Marriage

Paul's teaching on marriage also has some bearing on this discussion. There has been debate as to whether the term "head" implies authority, but the command for the wife to submit implies/suggests that it does. Husbands and fathers have responsibility for the welfare of their families and they should exercise authority in a loving way for the spiritual and physical welfare of their wives and children.

Role of women in the Old Testament

What we see in the New Testament is, as we would expect, a reflection of patterns laid down in the Old Testament. Leadership and teaching were reserved for men; priests, prophets and kings were men. There were exceptions with regard to prophecy, but these are few and far between. However, as in the New Covenant so under the Old, women are co-workers with the men. In the book of Proverbs, we note that both the mother and the father are to be involved in the teaching and training of

the children, and the virtuous woman of the closing chapter has a wide remit in terms of service.

Role of women in the New Testament
Women, like men, receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit and are involved in the work of the gospel. Women are witnesses to the resurrected Christ (e.g. Matthew 28:1-10) and are to pass on this good news. Many of the gospel workers mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:1-23 are women. Women are included in the command for us all to teach one another in the body of Christ (Colossians 3:16).

Implications for church life
Reflecting upon the biblical data, we can see that the primary leaders and teachers of the church are to be suitably qualified men, which does not include those presenting as male by virtue of gender reassignment.

Teaching, though, is not to be restricted to pastor/teacher/elders. All Christians are to be involved in teaching and encouraging one another. This includes women who are to teach other women (Titus 2:4) and who may well be involved in teaching in other forums. How exactly this works out in practice may well vary from church to church.

Implications for FIEC
To ignore the prohibitions of Scripture is not something we can endorse, nor can we be silent on the issue. Healthy oversight is essential for the welfare of the churches, and we believe the word of God makes it clear that this must be done by suitably gifted and qualified men.

This will mean that churches belonging to the FIEC should not have a woman pastor-teacher or women elders.
This also has implications for those wishing to join the Pastors' Network. Those applying to do so would need to accept the position of the FIEC on this issue.

Same Sex Marriage

Historic Convictions of FIEC
FIEC holds to the traditional Christian ethic:

1. Sexual intimacy is a gift from God and is to be enjoyed exclusively within the context of marriage;

2. Marriage is, by definition, heterosexual.

These convictions are derived from the clear teaching of Scripture: in both the Old and the New Testament, marriage is painted in a positive light, and homosexual activity, along with all other sexual intimacy outside of (heterosexual) marriage, is declared by God to be sinful. Nowhere in the Bible is there an expectation that marriage can exist between two or more people of the same sex.

Old Testament Background
In the beginning God created Adam and Eve – one man united to one woman (Genesis 2:18-25). It is to be noted that sexual intimacy was part of the pre-Fall relationship between the man and the woman and is a gift to humankind. Reading through the rest of the Old Testament, it is apparent that the model set forth in Genesis 2 is the God-given pattern for marriage (e.g. Genesis 24, Song of Songs, Proverbs 31:10-12). Wherever sexual activity occurs outside of marriage it is presented in a negative light, and the Mosaic Law expressly forbids adultery (Exodus 20:14) and fornication (Exodus 22:16), as well as homosexual sex (Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13).

New Testament Confirmation
It has been pointed out that not all the commands of the Mosaic Law are carried over into the New Covenant; for example, the food laws are rescinded (Mark 7:19), and the New Testament commands loving church discipline, as opposed to the death penalty, for those who wilfully and persistently break God's laws.

The New Testament, however, upholds the teaching of Genesis on marriage; Jesus when asked about divorce refers to Genesis 1-2 (Matthew 19:5-6), showing that he understands marriage to be a one-flesh relationship between a man and a woman. Further, the presupposition in Paul's teaching is that marriage entails a husband-wife relationship (Ephesians 5:22-33). Again, all the references to homosexual sex are

negative and indicate that it is sinful (Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:8-10).

Reaffirmation of FIEC Convictions in the Current Climate
Despite pressures from society, FIEC churches will continue to uphold the traditional biblical view that:

1. sexual activity is a gift to be enjoyed only within (heterosexual) marriage and that, outside of this setting, it is sinful;

2. marriage involves a man and woman, bound together in covenant relationship – a relationship that cannot be redefined. At the same time, we will always seek to make clear

3. the forgiveness and grace that extend to all repentant sinners – including those for whom sexual sin has formed a major part of their backgrounds.

Implications for Practices of FIEC Churches
In line with the above reaffirmations,

1. we will seek to uphold traditional biblical sexual ethics in both our teaching and our practices within our local churches and our Pastors' Network;

2. none of our churches or accredited pastors would in good conscience be able to perform, bless or host same-sex marriage or wedding ceremonies;

3. recognising that many Christians struggle with sexual temptation (whether same-sex attraction or heterosexual), we will prayerfully foster, within our churches, gracious support of one another in such struggles.