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The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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Editorial

Our perception of the other faith communities has been influenced, this century, by a number of factors. One is the decline in European self-confidence. A second is the increasing personal contact, especially in multi-faith areas. And a third, related to this, is a better understanding of their belief systems. The result is that we now have three broad responses within Christianity. To the *exclusivist* response, "no salvation outside the Church", we have added the *inclusivist*, recognising aspects of truth in non- Christian religions, and the *pluralist*, in which all religions are respected as valid within their own terms of reference.

Theologians, too, reflect this wide panorama. Karl Barth distinguished Christianity - helplessness before God - from "religion", which he saw as a vain human activity to reach God. Thus all non-Christian religions were adjudged false. On the other hand, we have Karl Rahner who writes of "anonymous Christians", who live in their religions by the grace of Christ, though they do not know it.

Many of us feel a tension here. We wish to hold to the supreme biblical revelation of God in Christ, yet are hesitant to presume to set limits to the activity of God's grace in the world. Perhaps living uncomfortably with this tension is the only road to integrity when it comes to encountering other faiths.

This is an area in which the U.K. Baptist family is served by JOPPA. It seeks to inform, resource and, sometimes, to challenge us. Edward Williams, as secretary, tells of its development, role and vision. Any books on our shelves by P.T. Forsyth are likely to be old and dog-eared. Ron Armstrong appeals for a contemporary appraisal of this significant Free Church theologian of yesteryear. After this, Anthony Thacker engages with an issue which, in pastoral ministry, we are wrestling with more and more: co-habitation. In the first of a two-part article, he evaluates the issues.

The love-hate relationship between Christian activism and theological reflection is reaching a head in our generation. Does everything need to have sound theological foundations? Or is it valid if it can just be made to work? Haddon Willmer explores this vital area. Recently, Chris Cottom, in research for a dissertation, undertook a survey of some 100 Baptist Ministers in the North of England. The questions related to their role and organisational context. We have included a precis of his findings for your interest. The dust will just be settling after the strategic Denominational Consultation last month. Peter Shepherd contributes to the great debate, pleading for serious attention to be given to ecclesiology, long neglected. This completes our clutch of articles this time.

While we welcome unsolicited articles, we sometimes discover that these have already been offered to other publications and accepted. If this is the case, we would like to know. We would much prefer articles that have not already been published.

JOPPA: Its Role and Vision

"To provide a Baptist forum for reflection about mission, evangelism and dialogue in our multi-faith society."

That is the first of our four Aims. The word "dialogue" is the tricky one, because for some it is a dirty word, in contrast to "evangelism". Some of us struggled long to find a less loaded word, but failed to find anything adequate - it was a great relief when the word started to be used by undoubted evangelicals such as David Coffey!

At the very least it says that "If I want you to give me a proper hearing, I must give **you** a proper hearing". There are times when evangelism means proclamation, which is something we ministers try regularly to do in our preaching - but which of us would try to witness only by talking **at** people? It is also a sorry person who does not, within his or her own culture, have deeply respected friends who are not believers.

The fourth and last of our Aims is **"to keep before the whole denomination the** (wait for it) **insights, issues, joys and challenges arising from a multi-faith society"** Issues and challenges sometimes make us lose sight of insights and joys! But they are there.

Between the first and the last, are two other Aims. An affirmation: **"our belief in the God who has created the rich variety of humanity, and in Christ who has broken down the barriers between us."** If we had thought to do so at the time, we would surely have put "...belief in the **one** God..." For although others may worship and speak of God in different ways, there is only the one God who is there to be worshipped and spoken of. So, do Muslims worship the same God as we do? In a certain, limited sense it is misleading to say Yes - but I believe it is far more misleading to say No! (Did you know that if you were an Arabic Christian the word you would use for God is "Allah"?)

The remaining Aim is the nub of the matter: **"To hold together our Baptist traditions of respect for religious freedom and conviction, and our obligation to proclaim the Gospel."** Which of us would deny that **both** parts of this are fundamental for Baptists? And which of us finds it easy to hold them together? **JOPPA** has always hoped to embrace a wide spectrum of emphases on such matters, as has the denomination - if the "proclaimers" sometimes seem to be strident, **JOPPA** no doubt sometimes seems to over-emphasize the "respect" in an endeavour to redress the balance.

A Brief History

The leading spirit in the founding of Joppa Group was Graham Routley, then in Rochdale. He and Don Black, then Head of the BUGB Mission Department, called a consultation in late 1983 of those who were relating in some depth with people of other Faiths. A year later, Graham invited together five of us who had been at that consultation, the group was formed and we paid our first subscriptions!

The hope was always that the group would provide the stimulus and opportunity to examine the issues raised by the multi-faith situation, to feed this thinking and experience into the denomination and to provide support, encouragement and resources. By the time the first Bulletin appeared in July 1985 there were 29 members.

The name **"Joppa"** was adopted at that first meeting. Joppa was the place from which the Gospel was taken to Cornelius (Acts 10), a turning point for the Church

in its ministry among the gentiles. it was the place where Peter's prejudice against those outside his own religious community was challenged and overcome.

One specific reason for choosing such a name was that every attempt at a descriptive title was either incredibly ponderous or else appeared to identify us with some particular point or other on the Baptist spectrum! In fact, the Joppa story in Acts speaks to concerns across the whole spectrum. It tells of prejudice giving way to humble respect, of the acceptability to God of the good and godly of every race - and then of proclamation and response, of blessing and baptism.

We consciously modelled ourselves in many ways on the 'Health and Healing Group'. A network...a specialist group (not, please, a 'fringe' group!)...recognised and pump-primed by the Union, but with a valued freedom from constraint... a valuable resource at times **for** the Union...at other times, perhaps, a gadfly.

Two years after that first Bulletin appeared, it looked as if, in spite of all efforts, the Group would fizzle out - then a very successful consultation put it back on the road, and with ups and downs, it has continued ever since. Its members are from the inner city and from the 'white highlands', ministers, teachers and other lay people. There are those who are just beginning faith-to-faith encounter, those with great experience to share, and converts from other faiths. Group membership includes churches, colleges and other organisations. There have been bulletins and occasional papers, day-conferences, regular and varied 'fringe' meetings at assemblies. And then there was **the Book.**

An advertisement in the *Baptist Times* as well as in our own circles caught the imagination of a number. "Dialogue with those of other faiths - Baptist principles and experiences - join us for a Working Weekend on Guidelines for holding these together". Out of that weekend, in 1991, came "A Baptist perspective on InterFaith Dialogue", containing many of the stories that we shared, and recently reprinted after the first 500 copies sold out.[1]

Another major occasion was a 24 hour consultation in 1992, called by Derek Tidball while Head of Mission Department, between members of the Joppa Group and others representing BUGB (and also the BMS). At first it felt almost like "Joppa Group., with subversive tendencies, versus The Rest"! It became, in fact, almost a model of dialogue, with " a large measure of mutual understanding, the allaying of misgivings and fears between Baptists of very different stances, and a surprising measure of agreement". (The words are Derek's). Out of this came eventually a statement, adopted and commended by the BUGB Council on "Inter-Faith Relations in the Decade of Evangelism".[2]

Before going on to discuss current situations and issues that seem to fall within Joppa's ambit, a personal view.

Personal Perspective

As a BMS missionary with qualifications in Science and Theology, I taught at Serampore College for 10 years in the Physics Department. My mission text was, "To open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light..." (Acts 26:18). I discovered that my Head of Department was a fine teacher and scholar, whom I could not fail to respect. He had taken second place in his MSc to a subsequent Nobel Prize-winner, and (in his **spare** time!) studied history and gained first place in his MA! Exemplary in character and spirituality, he was a devout Hindu. Eager young missionary has to think furiously about his missionary integrity! He would be a poor Christian whose understanding was not enlarged by such experience. I learned the

principle I have held ever since: "You do not magnify Christ by belittling others".

Then came 16 years in inner-city Birmingham, including much contact with a very active, and open, Islamic centre. A defining moment came for me in Selly Oak at an International Summer school on Islam, which I attended as a mini-sabbatical. Participants were both Muslim and Christian, and at one session a very distinguished Muslim from the USA addressed us.

His theme was basically: "Whatever you Christians say, you really believe in three Gods - stop it!" At the end of his harangue, we Christians were all on our feet to reply; but a Muslim lady beat us to it. "Would all those Christians in this room who believe in three Gods, please stand!" ...Would all those Christians who believe in **one** God, please stand!" It was the most dramatic moment I have ever experienced, and it encapsulated many lessons. This address would have gone down a treat at a seminar for Muslims on "arguments to use against Christians!" he knew his Christian texts, but was too arrogant to accept **our** testimony to what we really believed. If anyone were ever to convert us, it would not have been he but the Muslim lady, who **understood** us. The occasion underlined the need to take seriously the commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness".

After Birmingham, I moved to an area with few of other faiths, and offered to become Joppa Group's secretary as a way of continuing to make some contribution in that field!

What Is Joppa's Continuing Role?

Many aspects have already emerged. A **linking** and **resourcing** of those who are actively engaged with people of other faiths - whether directly in witness, or seeking understanding, or offering practical help to the many who are disadvantaged. A natural body to which people can turn for **advice**, not least our denomination's leaders when multi-faith issues arise: a think-tank.

Both in Assembly meetings and day conferences we have sought to address some of the numerous issues which arise in the field of **education**. Many of these cluster around the leading of School Assemblies, and D of E guidelines. How should we properly respect those who do not hold Christian beliefs (including the many who are agnostic or atheist) at the same time as providing worship of a "wholly or mainly Christian character"? What about the many cultural issues that are linked with religion, such as concerns about girls in mixed-sex schools, and about halal foods?

Joppa Group has always tried to underline that **multi-racial issues** are not the same as multi-faith ones. There are whites of other faiths (not least, in Britain, Jews), and there are, of course, many black Christians. Nevertheless, many of those in this country who belong to other faith communities do, in fact, suffer indignities on account of their race, and this affects all our dealings with them. A Bangladeshi in East London who has suffered at the hands of white racists will not easily hear the Gospel from a white evangelist. We have here a great and continuing need for sensitivity and a proper reticence.

The Crusades, and the expulsions of Muslims and Jews from Spain, are **things of the past** for which we are in no sense responsible - but they still "queer the pitch" for Christian evangelism. **Thoughtlessness** by some can so easily raise the barriers for all of us. I was moved to write in protest when a recent big evangelistic enterprise sought to rouse Christians by listing, among other things, statistics for pornography, for the number of mosques in Western Europe, and for crime - in that order! How will you witness to a devout Muslim, more shocked by the sexual mores of this country than many Christians, when he discovers that some Christians class

his worship along with the activities of pornographers and criminals?!

Much of my comments seem to focus on Muslims, rather than those of the many other faiths. That is, in part, because they are the largest other faith group in this country, and in part because they are "people of a Book", and therefore more clear-cut. It is all too easy for "fundamentalist" Muslim and "fundamentalist" Christian to find themselves at loggerheads, for each to publicize the distressing things done or tolerated by the other, and to fuel the tensions in society thereby. This is surely a "Joppa" kind of plea that I am registering here!

We are often told that the world, with its **ethnic tensions**, is looking to the Christian Church to show a way in which different communities can live in harmony. That is one imperative for the Ecumenical movement, and yet we have Protestant and Catholic conflict in Ireland, Catholic and Orthodox conflict in former Yugoslavia. How much more does "ethnic cleansing" committed by Christians and Muslims poison the air (which is not to deny that there have been atrocities on the other side also). Joppa Group and the Baptist Peace Fellowship hope at the next Assembly to address the question, How can religions be instruments of peace rather than sources of conflict?

We have been in contact with the BMS following a reference in the strategy discussions to a "conscious dedication to enter into the reality of the other world faiths and what they mean to their adherents", and have been invited to meet them to discuss these matters further.

Finally, there is the area of **theological debate**, not least in the *Baptist Times,* following Inderjit Bhogal's address at this year's Assembly. At a meeting which we hosted jointly with the Baptist Urban Group, he spoke concerning "the uniqueness of Christ, the only Way". That was one of the issues with which, as "eager young missionary", I had to wrestle urgently, determined to be honest both with text and with experience! Debate will, and must, continue, but of one thing I am sure: these words are an affirmation of what is to be found in Jesus, rather than a stick with which to belabour others!

And that seems a good point at which to end my vision of what **Joppa** is a about.

Edward Williams

Footnotes:

1 " A Baptist Perspective on InterFaith Dialogue", available from BUGB Publications Office or from the above. (£1.50)

2 "Inter-Faith Relations in the Decade of Evangelism", available from BUGB Mission Department (free)

U.S.A. Exchange Ministries Opportunity

Two American pastors are seeking an exchange of churches in 1997:

A New Hampshire pastor with a church of some 100 members, wishes to exchange for a month or more.

A Massachusett's pastor would also like to exchange churches for the same period.

If you are interested, please contact the:

BMF USA Exchange Representative, Vic Sumner:
6 Middle Onslow Close, Ferring, Worthing, BN12 5RT

A Forgotten Theologian: P.T. Forsyth

In his lifetime P.T. Forsyth mattered, and much of what he wrote is only now coming to be seen as relevant to a whole range of burning issues which the Christian Church is grappling with today. He was a prophet - a man who lived a century before his time. Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest biblical theologian of the 20th century, thought Forsyth's theology was so close to his own, although Forsyth preceded Barth, that P.T. Forsyth was actually dubbed "The Barthian before Barth"

The Man and the Crisis

Dr Peter Taylor Forsyth was an Aberdonian, a child of a poor working class family. Born in 1848, he died in London in 1921. Dr A M Hunter described Forsyth as "One of the most brilliant minds in Europe". Dr Emil Brunner, the eminent Swiss theologian, called Forsyth, "the greatest of modern British theologians". In the records of Aberdeen Grammar School his early promise is shown by the brief mention, "Dux for 1864, Peter T Forsyth". He was probably the greatest Congregationalist theologian of all time.

He won his degree from the University of Aberdeen, and later studied theology in Germany. After ordination, while in his first pastorate, he found that his academic training had left him unable to communicate with ordinary working people. While struggling with this crisis, he underwent a radical spiritual and theological revolution, which transformed his ministry and indeed his whole theological outlook. "Christ crucified" became the central theme of all his theological thinking and writing. He described his conversion thus: "From being a lover of truth, I became a lover of Christ". His theology found a new basis and direction. Someone once said, "Whatever topic Forsyth started with, he soon made directly across country to the Cross. Christ crucified became the key to his whole theology, philosophy, ethics and political theory".

Liberalism and the Odd Man Out

Although Forsyth took the Incarnation very seriously, and indeed, Paul's doctrine of Christ in Philippians 2:5-11 became a foundation stone in his thought, he insisted that we must not stop at the Incarnation. Incarnational theology would have left him dissatisfied. He declared that the Incarnation by itself is incomplete, that the Son of God became man *in order to make atonement for sin at the Cross.* Jesus was born to die upon the cross. Here he was at one with James Denney who said "Christ's sacrifice began, not at Calvary, but at Bethlehem".

At one stroke he makes modern discussion about inter-faith worship irrelevant. For Forsyth, the burning question was not: "Is there any revelation of the one true God in other Faiths, but have they any Gospel, have they any message about God rescuing man (sic) from sin?" Christ, he insists, did not simply come to reveal God, but to do something even more essential. He came to bring redemption, i.e. to put sinners into a right relationship with God. Only the Christian Gospel can do that. It is not our knowledge of God that matters, but our relationship with God. Christ came, says Forsyth, not to increase our knowledge of God, i.e., not for revelation, but to rescue sinners, i.e. for redemption. Strangely enough, that emphasis is summed up in an old Gospel hymn which says "And when we call Him Saviour, we call Him by His name". Dr Cawley, of Spurgeon's, used to add, "We call Him by His proper name" - if Christ is not Saviour, then he is nothing. Our greatest need, said Forsyth, is not for a revelation but for redemption from sin.

Forsyth argued that the human race does not simply need divine revelation (which

seemed to be the thrust of Liberal Theology at the turn of the century). Wordsworth expressed liberalism's attitude in the line. "We needs must love the highest when we see it." To which Forsyth would have replied "Rubbish - the world saw the highest in Christ and rejected Him". To understand this is to grasp the core of Forsyth's belief. He argued that what sinful man needs is not enlightenment but rescuing from sin.

For Forsyth, God was not just our Father, but he was primarily the Father of Jesus Christ, and Jesus addresses God as "Holy Father" (John 17:11 and 25). Any God who does not have a righteous morality, i.e. who is not "holy", is not adequate to meet man's deepest need, and cannot be the God of the Bible. God's love is not sentimental love, but righteous love, suffering love, and thus redeeming love. Forsyth had no difficulty in holding to the substitutionary doctrine of the Atonement.

In the decade before World War 1, Forsyth's message was quite disturbing. Victorian liberalism, which was but a thinly disguised humanism, could not explain the human sin which had plunged Europe into the most terrible war in history. Forsyth's theology explained humanity's dilemma in Biblical terms. The cause of all its failure and frustration, insisted Forsyth, was simply summed up in a word which liberals had lost from their vocabulary - "sin".

He was talking in the language of the Reformation, raising again old doctrines which the theological intelligentsia of Europe thought were dead and buried. Yet he was not simply regurgitating 17th century Puritan theology, but brilliantly re-stating and re-forging it, going back behind it to the Bible, to make it relevant to the 20th century. Forsyth laid the axe to the tree of Liberal Theology which he found to be totally inadequate and too superficial to really grapple with the human dilemma.

Students of Forsyth today argue that, far from being out of date, this major British theologian was really a voice in the wilderness, proclaiming a message far in advance of his own time, but very relevant to ours a century later. Forsyth is really the prophet for our time. He has been called "A preacher's theologian", because he is so quotable.

Forsyth insisted that Christian theology must be based on Pauline theology. After all, he argued, Pauline theology forms the earliest strata of our present New Testament. Scholars date the Thessalonian Epistles before the earliest Gospel. Historically, when the Church has lost its nerve and lost its way (and Forsyth would probably say this is an accurate description of modern Christianity), then it needs a real revival and that revival can only come through a return to Pauline theology. He maintained that this has been the lesson of past revivals, and there is no other way for the Church today to rediscover its authentic role in mission. Indeed, he called the Church, "the missionary for our time".

The Voice of Forsyth

When Forsyth died in 1921, he had produced 21 books, some quite thin volumes, but others more substantial like *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, and *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*. Forsyth's influence continues down to our own time through the preaching and writing of modern Christian leaders such as Oswald Chambers, Dr J.K. Mozley, Dr A.M. Hunter, and former Archbishop Donald Coggan, to name but a few.

It is high time to put some pressure on Christian publishers to re-issue some of Forsyth's books. Ministers and theological students would find their theology transformed by them. Forsyth puts iron into the preacher's message.

Here are some typical quotations from this most quotable theologian:

"The peril of the hour is religious subjectivism which is gliding down into religious decadence for want of an objective authority"

"The positivity of the Gospel means the effective primacy of "The given"".

"For positive theology Christ is the object of faith, for Liberal theology He is but the first and greatest subject. It is an infinite difference" (i.e. Liberalism preached Jesus as man's example, and urged us to emulate His faith. The New Testament makes Jesus the object of faith)

"An undogmatic Christ is the advertisement of a dying Faith" (what an indictment of contemporary Christianity)

"The Christ of the Gospels is not Christ the Character, but Christ the Saviour" (i.e. he says it is not the Sermon on the Mount sinful man needs but the Cross on the hill)

"We need less homilies on "Fret Not", or "Study to be quiet" but more sermons on "Through Him the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world" (That alone makes thousands of current Christian paperbacks irrelevant at a stroke)

A final word. Forsyth charged theological liberalism of his time with "sentimentality". He wrote "Much of our inculcated piety is flabby, and the simplicity of Christ becomes pietistic wish-wash". (What he would say of modern public worship one shudders to think. He would accuse us of substituting sentimentality for theology. Mission Praise would go straight out of his study window! He noted that Nonconformist churches were becoming centres of worship for women and children, but not for men. This, he would claim is a triumph for sentimentalism.)

I hope this has whetted some appetites. Start searching for Peter Taylor Forsyth's books and awaken your theological taste buds. His theology could transform you just as it transformed him - and me! If you can find one of his books, pass it on to another minister.

Ron Armstrong

Co-habitation I: The Issues

Introduction

In this paper I wish to discuss co-habitation , both in relation to requests for marriage, but also, and especially in relation to, requests for baptism and church membership. But in this first part of the article, we tackle the broad, underlying question.

Is Co-habitation Acceptable?

Co-habitation is only one aspect of the clash between human culture and Christian ethics in the area of sexuality. It is only one form of the conflict over sexual relations outside of, and especially before, marriage, and I shall argue that it is a mistake to see this new practice in isolation from other changes in sexual behaviour amongst young people and in society generally.

As a working definition, we shall assume co-habitation is where a couple are living together in the same dwelling-place in a relationship similar to husband and wife, normally including full sexual relations, and with or without children being born, but without having entered into a binding marriage contract, whether religious or secular. This relationship is different to the 'trial marriages' promoted by Judge Lindsey and Bertrand Russell in the 1920's[1] in that their proposal was limited to the situation before children are born. I understand that, from a legal point of view, co-habitation starts at the point when a couple have lived together for three consecutive nights. But we will stick with our working definition.

The suggestion sometimes made is that co-habitation is acceptable, either because of biblical arguments, or because of precedent in Church history.

One argument runs that the Bible sees entering into a sexual relationship as equivalent to entering marriage, the corollary of which is that by entering into co-habitation, couples are from the Christian perspective, *ipso facto*, already married. A verse that could be pressed in this direction in Deuteronomy 22:28: *If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, He must marry the girl, for he has violated her; he can never divorce her as longs as he lives*, Exodus 22: 16-17 makes it clear the money is a bride-price, but gives the father the right to refuse his daughter to a rapist: *"If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins."* In the New testament, we have 1 Corinthians 6: 15-17, where Paul argues against sexual union with a prostitute, because it unites the believer with her bodily, and in deeper ways. Strikingly, he applies Genesis 2:24 to this relationship and not just to marriage.

The problem with this argument is that even if it works, by redefining co-habitation as marriage, it means that when partners split, they are divorcing. But co-habitation is generally entered into because partners have not yet reached the position where they are committed for life. It is a stage towards such commitment in many cases, but there is an implicit acceptance that the relationship is provisional, and that it might not work, and be ended.

A.E. Harvey gives a second biblical argument.[2] He says the question never arose in the Bible, because "Opportunities, to say the least, were limited. Most girls married soon after puberty; adultery was a serious matter, and prostitution (which

itself provoked strong moral disapproval) offered the only means of casual gratification." (p461) Into the gap of uncertainty, he places *The Song of Songs* which he sees as expressing 'the passion of a couple newly betrothed' (p 462). He concludes: "the Church must be said to be standing on uncertain ground when it appeals to the Bible to support its teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the limitation of all sexual intercourse to the married state." (p464) Instead of appealing to 'individual, and for the most part problematic, texts' (p 468), we should, says Harvey, rest on Paul's teaching on love (p466), which can provide support to those in marriage, those whose marriages have failed and who remarry, and cohabitees (p. 467).

To my mind the most serious difficulty with Harvey's argument, and his aim to help the Church to become 'less estranged from its younger adherents' (p 468) is his rather naïve suggestion that "permissiveness or promiscuity...is not what the majority of young people today are asking for. Many of them are as shocked by the notion of casual sex as their forebears were, particularly if it involves the commercial exploitation of women". (p463) He assumes that we are dealing with a simple clear-cut move from patterns of marriage (usually life-long) to patterns where this is supplemented by a period of co-habitation instead of, or more usually before, marriage; and he believes he can draw the line at promiscuity. In practice, however, the development of co-habitation is not an isolated phenomenon, but one part of a whole series of interconnected changes to the practice of sexual relationships in western societies. Indeed, Harvey has to concede that: "In their view [that of young people] the best preparation for marriage is a period of mutual exploration and sharing at every level. If this reveals serious incompatabilities that cannot be overcome, it may have to be abandoned in order to begin again with another partner." (p.463)

The main other changes include a divorce rate rapidly approaching 40 per cent, with divorces approximately twice as likely among those cohabiting before marriage compared with those who did not cohabit before marriage.[3] Indeed Alistair Burt (the Social Security Minister), speaking on 13 September 1994, "singled out for criticism unmarried couples who started families. He said research showed that cohabiting couples [i.e. not married] were four times as likely to split up as those who were married".[4] Even more importantly, we have the development of a much more casual attitude to sex among the next generation, i.e. those who are younger than the co-habitees. Whereas, in 1966, only 6 per cent of boys and 2 per cent of girls had sexual experience below the age of consent, by 1991, it had become 34 per cent of boys and 48 per cent of girls. A 1994 survey among girls revealed 49 per cent had sex experience at 15 years or earlier, 59 per cent at 16 or earlier, and that's not counting the 35 per cent who refused to answer that particular question on the survey! Pastoral experience among this generation confirms these statistics. Quotable quotes include, from a 17 year old Christian girl: "I've never slept with anyone I didn't like"; and, according to Julia Hirst, senior lecturer in health promotion at Sheffield's Hallam University, one girl in her survey commented "I'd never have sex with someone if I didn't know their name."[5] The implication is clear: with a much more rapid change of sexual partners amongst teenagers, coherence in relations between the sexes is being lost, and attempts to accept co-habitation will be seen as out-of-date by the very constituency Harvey is out to impress - the line he draws is being crossed.

The same considerations apply to the comments on co-habitation by former Mother's Union President, Mrs Rachel Nugee: "Are we witnessing here one of those major shifts in behaviour that happen in any community from time to time? I believe

we are, and I also believe that this particular shift has nothing to do with morality. In other words, as long as the relationship passes the tests of permanence, exclusiveness and heterosexuality, I do not believe it is sinful".[6] More cautiously, Diane Johnson, another Mother's Union ex-President, suggests: "We could be seeing a change similar to the one which brought the Anglican church to a new moral evaluation of contraception between the 1930's and 1960's. I hope so," she adds.[7]

The argument from Church history runs similarly. For example, Lynda Le Tissier in the article following Harvey's, in *Theology*,[8] called 'The Church and Co-habitees' says:

Until fairly recent times the Church actually recognized, accepted and even celebrated co-habitation, which they called 'marriage by consent', as the normal relationship model. Before 1563, as far as the Church was concerned, co-habitation was marriage. Then the Council of Trent decided that a couple could only be considered married if they presented themselves to a priest together with two witnesses to declare their intention to co-habit as married: but this 'marriage before the parson' was very informal. (p.469)

Diane Johnson adds that such "marriage without a ceremony was regarded as valid.. until 1753 under English Civil law."

In practice, however, there is an important distinction between earlier practices of 'marriage by consent' and modern co-habitation, and it arises from the difference in social and legal context. In a society where divorce is virtually impossible, where it was from early medieval times until 1857, (e.g. in the 150 years of 1702 -1852, just 250 divorces were granted), "marriage by consent" becomes a clear, life-long commitment. The only difference is in the lack of religious or secular ceremony. In our society, co-habitation is a deliberate decision not to formalise the relationship yet with a religious or civil ceremony, because that level of intended life-long commitment has not been reached. As Jack Dominian comments, "Here the public dimension of the relationship is denied", leaving the relationship "incomplete".[9] Thus, modern co-habitation is not usually 'marriage by consent', but 'living together with sexual relationships but without public commitment to life-long togetherness by consent'. It is this dimension which puts the typical co-habiting relationship as out of line with the Christian approach, as the entering of committed sexual relationships without the life-long personal commitment, or even, in some cases, with a clear rejection of such a personal commitment. To put it bluntly, to enter into co-habiting relationships, with the intention to split, and form new relationships, or the deliberate acceptance of this as a possibility, offends against the Christian teaching against adultery and in favour of life-long mutual commitment just as much as a decision to get married with a similar intention of splitting (or deliberate acceptance of that as a possibility) would be.

It seems to me that what is wrong with co-habitation, from a Christian perspective, is that by removing the dimension of public acknowledgement of commitment, it implies at least a lack of life-long commitment, and often an unwritten assumption that the couple is testing the relationship, with a view to quitting, if they feel it's not the one for them.

Meanwhile, the arguments from the Bible and Church history are not usually relevant or compelling. Entering a loving and sexual relationship, as an exploration, a 'trial marriage' which is provisional, allowing a move on to a new relationship, contradicts the entire thrust of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Despite some unusual patterns of sexuality in the Patriarchal period, and the eroticism of *the Song of*

Solomon (the interpretation of which is not determinable on this issue, as the variable translations indicate), no explicit teaching or implied conclusions from incidents, encourages the belief that writers in either the Old or New Testament accepted that sexual encounters could be provisional in this way.

As for lessons from history, e.g., of 'marriage by consent', as Jack Dominian points out: "The difficulties arising from this situation of private commitment was the increasing problem in which partners committed themselves fully to more than one person, and the scandal of clandestine marriages forces the Church ultimately to insist on a public ceremony, in the presence of the parish priest and two witnesses." [10]

Thus my first conclusion is that we can and should resist the popular idea that co-habitation is just one of those cultural shifts that we have got to get used to and accept. Instead, we should argue that there is a difference between co-habitation and marriage, including 'marriage by consent', and that difference lies in a clear and intended commitment to one another for life, and that this commitment be public, i.e. it means that it is something which changes the couple's relationship with society, eg, that they are no longer available for a committed relationship with anyone else, because they have made their life-long commitment.

In the second part of this article, we will look at the pastoral issues arising from co-habitees making requests for marriage, and for baptism and church membership.

Anthony Thacker

Footnotes:

1 Bertrand Russell: *Marriage and Morals*, 1929, Unwin, 1961, ch12, pp81-86

2 A.E. Harvey, 'Marriage, Sex and the Bible (II),' in *Theology*, 1993, pp 461-468. References in the text are to this volume.

3 HMSO, 1992, quoted in the *Baptist Times*, 2 July 1992

4 Source: Teletext.

5 Source for 1994 survey and second quotation: *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1994

6 Quoted by Mark Rudall, in *Baptist Times*, 2 July 1992

7 In *Launde Leaves* - Leicester Diocesan Retreat House Magazine, Spring 1993

8 Lynda Le Tissier: "The Church and Co-habitees" in *Theology*, 1993. pp 468-476

9 Jack Dominian: *Marriage, Faith and Love*, Darton Longman and Todd, 1981, p94

10 Jack Dominian: *Proposals for a New Sexual Ethic*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977, p.58

A Defence of Theology

The Editor has asked me to write about the 'uneasy relation between theological reflection and pragmatic activism'. 'In a survival situation, theology appears to be a luxury we can no longer afford'. So it is commonly supposed that the correct or fruitful question is 'Does it work?' rather than 'Is it true?'

I do not know how to respond to this challenge adequately. I will argue that doing theology is essential to the Church and its mission but I am not confident that we can do what is required of us. Faith may not survive. Anti-intellectualist populist culture may well continue to block the Church's thinking obedience to the Gospel. So in this argument I will be consistently against those who think they can get away with pragmatic activism, or dispense with theology, or understand theology simplistically, or set effectiveness and truth against each other.

I am at least grateful to hear that Churches are *thinking* they are in a survival situation; that is truer than pretending all is well. Although dismal diagnoses are often softened lest they damage morale and undermine action, I also believe that accepting we are in a survival situation will encourage us to look for what will truly work. But if theology is regarded as a luxury, can it be said that the churches are *thinking*? Like the secular world in general, awash with thought or at least with IT, the churches may be thinking hard yet not doing much theology. Church leaders have to think about how to manage and mobilise the church and how to be more deeply or popularly religious, about how to counsel and how to run pop-groups - there is no end to it, and it can make us too busy for theology, which is nothing other than thinking and talking with reason about God.

It is a mistake to give up thinking about God in order to lighten the ship - the ship will be lighter if we throw away the wheel and the compass but we have no chance of surviving. Christians would do well to adapt the argument of Dow Marmur, addressed to his fellow Jews in *Beyond Survival*: if a people or a movement is to survive, it must have better reasons than merely wishing to survive. The reasons must reflect the positive worth and meaning of the community and the movement. Why ought it to survive? What strong but arguable, transparent, non-manipulative claim has it on people's loyalty? Articulating and living such reasons, in a church, comes close to doing theology. A church that somehow survives but cannot or will not **justify** its existence theologically, by speaking about God, will have lost its identity and integrity. It may keep itself alive as a business or a club, but will have failed to be consistent with its **professed** meaning and nature as a people of **God**.

Is that so? Or can the church have integrity without theology? Consider the case of the *Sea of Faith*. It is aware of the difficulties of orthodox Christian theology and of theism generally. It seeks to enjoy traditional liturgy and cultivate spiritual disciplines while holding talk of God to be non-realist. 'God' is thus a symbol of our highest ideals and the focus of a disciplined quest to live according to these ideals. Curiously, more serious theological thinking seems to come from this school than from many who insist that Christian faith is centred on a God who is **really** there. Few Baptists admit to swimming very far out in the *Sea of Faith*, or wish to be a fish in this school, though the wise are modestly aware of the symbolic, human elements of faith. If Christian faith is to survive among Baptists, they will have to work at some other positive and sensitive realist theology of their own. In doing so, they will have to face up to the questions and difficulties the *Sea of Faith* and others remind us of. It will not do to make theological assertions which have an appearance of life because

because they can mobilise antagonistic fear of nebulous liberalism but are unable to nurture true faith in God. 'Within the Church no one was ever thrown out for having too crude and primitive an understanding of faith. It is only intellectuals that get thrown out, so the church always purges itself from the top down. Does this mean that the drift to decline and fundamentalism is unstoppable? I don't know." (Don Cupitt, *Times Higher,* 19 July 1966, p20). Baptists who shun theology may make a home for the crudely opinionated and the unthinking who want to experience emotion and authority but it is no way for a Christian church to survive. Theology is needed to save the church from taking the name of God in vain. Since we cannot have a church without preaching and praying, there is no guaranteed immunity from the danger of taking God's name in vain. If we want to be both honest people and theological realists, we need to work at theology, so that our speaking of God deserves respect as a genuine attempt to be true to God.

Being true to God commits us to practising theology. Christianity is, more than most, a theological religion, because, according to its own account, it is generated by a theological God.

Word and Spirit

God is not God without his Word. 'God is his own interpreter' - God interprets God by his own Word, who is eternally one with God's life and is made manifest and spoken to us, variously by the prophets and now by his Son, the Word made flesh (John 1:1f; Hebrews 1:1f) Theo-logy is not a luxury for God but intrinsic to God's being.

Does God then do all the theology which is necessary for us? Has God, for example, caused it all to be written in the Bible, so that we may merely receive and repeat its words without searching for and inventing words for ourselves (remember the unbiblical *homoousion*?) If we so use the Bible, we leave the theologian-God lonely, and have no fellowship or partnership with him. But it is not like that at all. No one who has ever read a bit of the Bible, let alone anyone who has prepared a Bible study or a sermon, can honestly think that God has done all the theology for us. What God gives in the Bible is theology which provokes theology, not merely as acquired information but as the search for truth and the exercise of responsible judgment about what to say.

Others spare themselves from theological labour by leaving it to the Spirit, the divine, omnipresent and free theologian - but there is no escape from the duty of 'trying the spirits whether they be of God'. This, too, is theological activity. The test proposed by 1 John 4:1 is theological: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. This test does not work as a formula or a magic litmus paper; merely quoting these words will not prove that a spirit is of God. The test has to be theologically understood and applied in each case with theological acuity. The task requires understanding of what we are testing; of ourselves as testers; and of our responsibility to God in whose service this work is to be done. Does it satisfy this test, for example, to insist on some specific form of historicity in Jesus Christ while cultivating a spiritual world-fleeing spirituality which shuns making history now? What is 'the flesh' that Jesus has come in? Is it only a particular body early in the first century or is it the universal of the flesh of humanity? The way we answer questions of this kind forms a whole theological 'character'.

God the Word and God the Spirit therefore invite us into the fellowship of theological work rather than doing it for us. And the work we have to do puts in question our identity, natures and conduct as human beings. Theology is not

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To Readers of the Baptist Ministers' Journal

We have appointed a new Assistant General Manager, Mr. A. J. Green to replace Mr. Howell who has taken early retirement. Alf Green was previously employed by Royal Insurance in Branch and Regional Office Management roles and therefore comes to us with a wealth of insurance experience. He will be responsible for day to day underwriting as well as assisting me in planning our future products.

Currently we are in the throes of modernising our existing computers and installing a new system which will enable us to vastly improve our standard of policy documentation. I am also reviewing Policy covers generally in respect of scope and price to provide an insurance product that more accurately reflects the needs of today's Church. I would welcome any comments or suggestions you may wish to make in this respect.

Yours in His Service

T E Mattholie

therefore to be left to a few intellectuals; its work cannot be restricted to a few highly developed areas of study which are traditionally labelled "theology". Much study of the Bible is essentially linguistic and historical, so it is possible to be learned in the Bible without doing much theology. Theology is where we talk about God, before God and for God responsibly, whatever academic label we give it.

The Priority of Reflection

The Church has to attempt speaking about God to be true to the theo-logical God whose self-revelation gives the Church its being and its mission. The Church has to have a life of reflective thought as its critical self-assessment of how it is doing in its task. This critical self-assessment may sometimes come to expression in the criticism of church leaders by church people or of church people by leaders - but then it is in danger of falling away from theology (which is shaped by responding to God) to sink into manipulative and petty church politics. Being theological reminds us that it is before God and to God that we live, standing or falling (Romans 14:4). To reflect theologically is thus a discipline not easily acquired; it is a way of setting God before us in all we do, and of knowing and living our whole selves, as creatures in the world, before God. When we are secularised by our cultural embeddedness it is hard to practise such discipline. And yet it will enable us to get free of petty ecclesiasticism and to live in and for the world. For when we reflect on our practice before God we are invited to think about what we are doing within the horizons of God's whole creation and God's will for it - and that calls us out of the merely churchly preoccupations. Are we living as those created in the image of God, representing God and the concerns of God's kingdom in the world? Are we humanists, as God is, so that nothing human is alien to us?

Theology is not talking about God as though God were one abject amongst others and therefore only a fraction of reality. Theology is a wide ranging activity touching everything, because it is thinking about anything in the light, and for the service, of God. We cannot see much when we look directly at the sun and there is a limit to what we can say directly about God. But in the light of the sun, the world becomes visible to us. Human language is drawn from and developed in the world. If God were wholly outside the world, we could say nothing about God. But since God creates, works with, comes into and judges the world, we may talk about God through talking about the world. One concern of theology is therefore to understand and to find language to say how God makes himself available to the world, thus enabling us to talk more about God than would be the case if we were left to look directly at God and be blinded.

To reflect on our humanity in the world before God cannot be merely backward looking. I am not sure what is meant when theology is classed as reflection, but, to me, the word is an invitation to think about what has already been done and experienced. Reflection is undoubtedly an ingredient of theology: 'Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review...' Is part of the popularity of classing theology as reflection that it distances it from 'pragmatic activism'? That would reveal a limitation and danger in seeing theology as reflection, for theology is also a matter of forward looking hope and intention, of venture and determination. And this is not vague or spiritual hope for the distant future - it is hope for the future we have to work for now while it is day. Theology is not just reflection, it is also policy-making. It specifies goals and aspirations, by which action is organised into a coherence of values and priorities. Thinking of God is not a mere interpretation of what is and has happened, but is a way of desiring and planning for the future. As policy, theology becomes serious prayer - and helps to save prayer from being futile, unrealistic and

deceptive religiosity. One reason why the Church is now struggling to survive is that many people are not interested in policy - there is a widespread scepticism in our society about the possibility of doing anything about the future. When the Church succumbs to mere positivism, it consigns the world to fate, and thus goes back on one of the successful struggles of the Early Church, in which it preserved its hebraic inheritance in the faith by arguing that the future was controlled not by the stars but by God. This theological victory opened the way to treating the future as a meaningful human responsibility. There is, mercifully, still a remnant in our society who believe in the possibilities and duty of policy-making but too few of them turn to the Church - they do not hear faith expressed as realistic policy.

If theology is policy, as well as reflection on what is remembered, it has to take into account human frailty, incompetence, failure. Making policy involves the art and practice of forgiveness. Again and again we have to begin acting and thinking from a place we would rather not have reached. In making policy, it is not enough to say what ought to be done (ethics are always inadequate) nor to have an idea how, under proper conditions, what ought to be done might be achieved. Conditions are rarely proper. Policy does not turn ideals into uncompromisable rules for action, but finds effective, though sacrificial and complex, ways of forgiving, so that plain judgment is given between good and evil, and sinners, individual and corporate, are released from sin and set free for God and goodness. If the Gospel of forgiveness is merely reflection, the forgiving is cheap and useless - it is saying after the event that no harm is done, it does not matter. Theology as policy invites us to think, in all situations, of joining in the clear-sighted ministry of forgiveness, ever re-opening human beings in history towards the promise of God. It is activism at its best.

In the End, God

The Editor's question suggested that part of the difficulty of theology nowadays arises from our preferring the question 'Does it work?' to 'Is it true?' To set such questions in mutually exclusive opposition is to run from God, for in God all things come together. Sometimes in our sin and blindness, we pursue short-term gains in some selfish enterprise; so long as it works, to achieve private profit, we do not worry about whether it is true or good. But God, if God means anything at all, invites us to think, to pray and to plan towards the blessedness where all three questions: Does it work? Is it true? and Is it good? are answered by one and the same Reality - God, in whose image humanity is created and is to be recreated. To work with one question in preference to others is to show we either do not know or do not care about **God**. In the light of God, who finally tests all our works, what **works** is precisely what matches and serves the **goodness** of God, as revealed in total **truthfulness**. We, of course, now cannot perfectly achieve this unity of truth, goodness and reality - but in faith we can be hungering and thirsting for it. And to live in that hope is impossible without theology - for the unity of truth, goodness and reality, which is God, is not known to us in present experience. We glimpse it through fragments. We know that in the present they war against each other, tearing God and humanity apart as they go along. But God is beyond the present world as its saving call and hope. God can be thought where God is not yet possessed and thus theology represents and keeps open the place of God in a godless world (cf D Soelle *Christ the Representative*).

Haddon Willmer

Baptist Ministers Today: A Survey

1. Eighty-four ministers participated in the study.

2. The leadership team in 19 per cent of respondents' churches includes elders.

3. Congregations are believed by respondents to attach more importance to the minister's role as pastor than respondents themselves do. Respondents see the team co-ordinator, evangelist, representative and administrator roles as a little more important than they believe congregations do, while the reverse is the case with the worship leader role.

   Thirty-two per cent of respondents indicate that the pastor role takes up the greatest part of their time.

4. Nearly half the respondents (44 per cent) claim that in their present church 'the people are the church, and the minister equips them for their ministries'. Overwhelmingly this is the model that respondents aspire to (94 per cent).

   Respondents are fairly evenly divided on the statement: 'The presence of a full-time paid minister may inhibit others in the church from developing their own gifts of ministry'. Forty-three per cent 'strongly agree' or 'agree', 19 per cent 'neither agree nor disagree' while 38 per cent 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'.

5. In general, respondents assess the success of their ministries from a range of four main types: quantitative measures (36 per cent of respondents), the spiritual growth of individuals (44 per cent), the extent to which the church develops as a group (54 per cent) and personal factors (14 per cent).

6. Respondents may sometimes feel constrained by their financial dependence on their congregations.

7. More than half the respondents have a fragmented work pattern. Thirty-eight per cent spend little time on the conscious, systematic formulation of plans, with planning tending to take place in the course of other activity.

8. The most common problems that respondents face in fulfilling their ministries are, in order: time, financial resources, human resources, impact on family, churches' expectations of ministers, overload and burn-out, ministers' expectations of churches, ministers' expectations of themselves and organisational factors.

9. The most common roles mentioned in connection with the Baptist Union are: resources, support, identity, a channel for sharing financial resources, and training and/or accreditation.

   Seventy-five per cent of respondents see the role that the Union plays in their ministry as 'important' or of 'medium importance'.

Chris Cottom

NB: Copies of the full survey may be obtained from Stuart Jenkins.

The Renewal of the Union

R.W. Dale, the great Congregationalist leader of the late nineteenth century, said that one of the abiding consequences of the Evangelical Revival for the Dissenting Denominations was a loss of interest in the Church. Once the Baptists and Congregationalists became caught up in the mighty moving of God's Spirit in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, they seemed to lose interest in the ecclesiological principles that had been so important to their forefathers.

That is not to say that church reorganisation did not occur. Denominational reform quickened pace throughout the second half of the 1800's. The climax came at the start of the twentieth century, when Baptists raised large central funds for building new churches in suburbia; took steps to improve the effectiveness of the ordained ministry; co-operated in ambitious evangelistic enterprises (in particular the massive Free Church Simultaneous Mission of 1901); created new departments of the Union. The watchwords were "organisation", "efficiency" and "aggression". The Union emerged, by the 1920's, as a much expanded and more powerful body than ever before. But little thought seems to have been given to the implications of all this for Baptist ecclesiology.

We are now, it seems, at a point where this framework is inadequate for the task. The key to change lies in our understanding of the Church, rather than in pragmatic questions about what seems likely to work. During the reforms of the early 1900's, ecclesiology played little part in the debate, and that was their weakness. The result was a degree of incoherence in church organisation, that we have suffered from ever since. This is evident today in a number of ways. There are, for example, profound contradictions inherent in the concept of multi-congregational local churches; a nationally accredited ministry, called and recognised by the local church; large churches of many hundreds claiming to operate the same principles of church government as churches of a few individuals. Some of these may be an inevitable consequence of living in the real, rather than, the ideal, world. The sad thing is that the ecclesiological significance of these issues is debated so rarely.

It is not that we should spend time gazing at our navels. It is rather that the Church is God's great gift to the world, as the embodiment of Christ, and for the continuing of his ministry on earth, and should therefore be taken seriously.

If we have any faith at all in our Baptist inheritance over four centuries, we should be asking, "What insights has God given us during those years concerning the nature of the Church? What kind of churches do we believe in? What pattern of ministry is presupposed by that idea of the Church?" It is only when we start asking those kinds of questions that we can start making progress in understanding what kind of Union God wants to give us. The recovery of ecclesiology is the key to the renewal of our denominational life.

What Kind of Church?

The soul of the Church is, in E.A. Payne's phrase, "the fellowship of believers". Central to its essential nature is the corporate life and unity of those whom God has called to new life in Christ.

For Baptists, this has always been expressed above all in the fellowship of the *local* church. This is where corporate belonging becomes a reality in people's lives. In the local church, people of different backgrounds and ages can come together, week by week and year by year, to share in worship, witness, caring and growth.

Here, the meaning of love, and "the Body of Christ", can be explored and realised, as nowhere else.

Apart from this, the importance of the local church is very relevant in our fragmenting society. It is the most potent agency of mission. When loneliness is an increasing problem, the possibility the Church offers of meaningful personal relationships is a powerful demonstration of the Gospel. The local congregation is also the best setting for discipleship and growth. Spiritual maturity depends more on healthy Christian relationships, than on any number of training courses, conferences and retreats.

Some may respond, "But that is not my experience of the local church. The local church is more often a place of superficial relationships and bickering than real fellowship". That may be true, but to give up on the local church is a counsel of despair, and a denial of the Gospel. It may be that the problems arise partly because we do not take the Church as seriously as we should. (Human sinfulness, no doubt, also has something to do with it). And there are, of course, many examples of fellowship in the local church that are wonderful demonstrations of the love of God.

One of the implications of this focus on the local is the importance of *size*. John Smyth's congregation, in exile in the Netherlands, believed that their model of a covenanting fellowship of baptized believers could not be maintained if they grew above a certain size. If they were to exercise the kind of mutual spiritual oversight that was essential to their vision of church life, they needed to know each other personally.The principle is important. How can congregational church life be preserved if it is organised in such a way, or is of such a size, that it is impossible for the members to know each other?

Another implication concerns the role of wider church bodies. A central part of their task is to set the local church free to be what it should be. This includes giving it the opportunity of entering into meaningful relationships with other local churches. As within the local church, these groupings need to be small enough to enable genuine fellowship to develop. As far as national bodies like the Union are concerned, a crucial role is to offer to bear some of the administrative burdens imposed by today's increasingly complex society. The maintenance of property; financial management; handling of information from Government and other bodies - these are tasks which are in danger of strangling the local church, diverting it from its more important tasks.

We need to be aware of the danger of taking the mission initiative away from the local church. frequently local, small scale, mission projects are overtaken by grander and remoter schemes, or churches "buy in" to initiatives that owe nothing to any local input. The result is that the church's sense of responsibility for mission is diminished, and its creativity stifled. Local churches need to look sceptically at the claim made on behalf of schemes of this kind, and to make good use of the waste paper basket when the attractive, expensively produced glossies come through the door.

What Kind of Ministry?

Historically, Baptists have always had a high view of the pastoral ministry. It has consistently been regarded as part of God's ordering of the best church life. The pastor's ministry is dependent on, and derived from, the whole ministry of the church of which he is a member, but his special role has always been recognised and respected.

Until the beginning of the 1900's, there was no thought of denominational

"accreditation". The idea of the Union acting as a "gatekeeper" to the ministry, controlling an official list of recognised ministers, and taking responsibility for them, would have been very alien. By the end of the First World War, however, this was precisely the situation that had developed. Entry to the accredited ministry was guarded by a series of centrally administered hurdles (examinations, interviews and a probationary period); settlement was facilitated by means of a central committee of General Superintendents (an office invented in 1915); and financial support and pension arrangements were improved, by the use of central funds raised for that purpose.

These reforms did much to help those ministers who were accredited, but their effect was to institutionalise a basic inconsistency in Baptist church life. A nationally accredited ministry and a congregational pattern of church life do not go together well. Various tensions emerged, and continue to this day, as a consequence of this. The difficulty of restricting the number of students training for ministry, for example, and of discouraging (or disallowing) local churches from calling unaccredited ministers, are two examples.

There is a need to move the ordained ministry away from the centre of debate about church life. Rather than allowing our present ministerial structures to determine our thinking about the Church, we should ask, "What kind of ministry is consistent with our understanding of the Church?" If our normal pattern and focus for church life is the local congregation, of, let us say, 50-150 members, we need to ask what kind of ministry will best enable those churches to fulfil their calling, in terms of caring, mission and worship. (It is unfortunate that the recent Union report on the ministry did not do this).

The full-time, professional, pastoral ministry is likely to become less typical in the future. Increased stipend levels will make this necessary, apart from anything else. The concept of ordination, leading to a life-long career in the Baptist ministry, is becoming increasingly untenable, as well as being dubious ecclesiologically. It implies a rather priestly understanding of ministry, that fits in poorly with the idea (more consistent with the Baptist view of the Church, and more typical of what most Baptists think) that a minister is a minister by virtue of what he *does*, more than by what he *is*. God does not call people, and we cannot ordain them, into new forms of existence, but only into new spheres of service in the church. Why not have a new ordination for each new sphere of service? Or should we stop using the language of ordination altogether?

We are increasingly coming to realise the importance of different forms of ministry. Some have been with us for a long time. Others are more recent in origin. They include missionaries, evangelists, youth workers, chaplains, tutors, Superintendents, Association secretaries and Union staff. Local churches have very little say in the way most of these ministries operate. We need to find ways of developing these ministries in such ways that they are *owned* by the local churches, and more clearly accountable to them. One of the ways that this might be done, in some cases, is by moving them closer to the churches, so that the employing bodies are Districts, Associations or other local groups of churches working together, rather than distant national bodies.

What Kind of Union?

1. We need to go on stimulating debate about the Church and ministry. Most of the debate in the recent past has centred on *national* Baptist life, culminating in the denominational consultation in September 1996. The Listening Days

process was good as far as it went, but was limited by the fact that it had a national, rather than a local, orientation. Debate at the local level needs to be open-ended, preferably involving groups of churches meeting to talk about their experiences, hopes and anxieties. A sense of responsibility for Baptist life and witness needs to be regained at the local level in this way. It is particularly vital that the ministry is included in this debate. Ministers need to talk about their own views and experiences of the ministry, and to listen to those of others. It is too easy to avoid the difficult issues because they are uncomfortable; to seek success without considering what principles are involved. The Union is deeply involved in this process because of its responsibility to seek the welfare of the churches.

2. We need to move control of as much denominational life as possible, to as local a level as possible. At present, many denominational bodies and activities seem to be remote, and their mechanisms of accountability are ineffective. Unless local churches can feel they own the organisations that operate in their name, and share responsibility for their successes and failures, their commitment to them is likely to be half-hearted. It is usually painful to take on responsibility, and there will be resistance to schemes of decentralisation, so the Union needs to do all it can to encourage the process.
3. We need the union to become more of an enabling, or resourcing agency, and less of a mission agency in its own right. Its constant priority should be to set local churches, Associations, or other local groups of churches, free to engage in, and take responsibility for, mission at the local level. There will continue to be a need for a national voice for Baptists, and for the Union to take responsibility for some aspects of mission, but its role should be essentially supportive, not engaging. In doing so it should seek to cooperate with others (denominational and non-denominational organisations) whenever possible.
4. We need to encourage the development of new and flexible patterns of ministry, and at the same time to offer support to ministers who are less able to adjust to this change. Ministerial resources need to be released for adventurous missionary work done on a cooperative basis, by Associations or local groups of churches, and ministry generally moved away from a pastoral to a mission model.

Peter Shepherd

Pre-Retirement Course, 1997

The Baptist Ministers' fellowship is looking into the possibility of setting up a pre-retirement course for Baptist Ministers in 1997, and would like to know how many might be interested.

Those who are should contact Jack Ramsbottom:
26 Chilton Road, Chesham Bucks HP5 2AU
Telephone 01494 774689

Book Reviews

***Discipleship* by J Henrich Arnold, Plough Publishing House, Darvell Bruderhof, Robertsbridge, East Sussex. Price £9-90 (discount of 40% for orders of more than one copy.) ISBN 0-87486-066-0.**

Henrich Arnold was an elder of the Bruderhof, a Christian community founded in Germany in 1920 by Eberhard Arnold. The community life is based on the teaching of Jesus, particularly that contained in the Sermon on the Mount.

This book, Discipleship, now in its fourth edition, brings together some three hundred short exerts from Henrich Arnold's writings. The main sections are "The Disciple", "The Church", and the "Kingdom of God". The book is well produced; stitched sections offering some protection against the tendency of paperbacks to self-destruct after a few years on the shelf. The discount for multiple copies makes it very good value. An index of scriptural passages

has been added as a loose leaf, which I suspect ensures it will soon get lost! This is very strange considering this is the fourth edition.

The book offers material that some will find suitable for use in private devotions and during the 'brain-storming' part of sermon preparation. There is much here that I have found stimulating. The approach to scripture is uncritical and there is an assumption that the thought world of the first century can be transferred to the end of the twentieth century without any problem.

One of the interesting issues the book raised was the use of letters in pastoral care. A high proportion of the paragraphs are extracted from letters. These consist of detailed pastoral advice and guidance at some depth. I can see that a letter offers an intermediate point between the rather impersonal nature of preaching and the rather intimate relationship of a one-to-one conversation. Through his writing Arnold was able to say things that needed to be said in a way that gave time and space for reflection to those he pastored.

John Houseago.

***Daughters of the Church* by Ruth A Tucker and Walter Leifield, Zondervan, £12.00 (including post and packing, available from EMA Books, 186 Kennington Park Rd, London SE11 4BT)**

Fact 1: Jesus founded his church with an all-male group of disciples.

Fact 2: The majority of Christians today are female, and women have outnumbered men in overseas missionary work.

Yet men still dominate positions of leadership in most Churches, and women's gifts tend to be depreciated. This book is not a polemic for Women's Lib in the Church. It is a history of women in the church and a study of changing perspectives about women down the centuries.

The authors come from conservative theological backgrounds and are involved in teaching theology. They deny any polemical purpose, and say, "We have tenaciously striven to present an objective account" to represent the truth as accurately as possible (p. 13).

They describe patterns and themes that have re-occurred throughout church history, showing how often theological arguments were culturally conditioned, a male dominated civilisation being reflected in the church. For example, we read of

many occasions when women had prominent roles at the beginning of ministries or missionary endeavours, but were later displaced by men in leadership as movements became more successful, structured and institutionalised.

Here is a wealth of brief biographies of prominent Christian women; some of the names are familiar, others are unknown and unsung. Each story respects the integrity of the subject and her unique contribution, at the same time avoiding the temptation to romanticise or idealise the person concerned.

The purpose of the book is to open the windows of the mind to new and old perceptions and to unmask assumptions and male prejudices in the Church.

The authors offer some conclusions: firstly that women have been far more involved in the Church's global mission than has been generally recognised. Secondly, women's roles tend to diminish as the Church's organisation becomes developed and authoritarian and male castes of priesthood and ministry are established. Thirdly, no examples have been found of heresy amongst women on the grounds of their sex alone.

Ron Armstrong.

Worship in Transition: The Twentieth Century Liturgical Movement. **by John Fenwick and Bryan Spinks, T & Clark, £9.95.**

Throughout my ministry (39 Years) I have been influenced by the Liturgical Movement, without, at times, knowing where that influence was coming from. This 200 page book, in a readable and accessible style, indicates the sources of the Movement and outlines the path of its development.

The Liturgical Movement is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon. The writers reveal firstly its roots and its radical effects in the Roman Catholic Church of Europe, then trace its development in all the mainline churches. The liturgical rediscovery is depicted as a renewal movement finding its sources in scriptural concepts, early church patterns and Reformation ideals. The whole Movement is seen as a protest against excessive individualism and the privatising of worship. It is emphatically not ecclesiastical tinkering or posturing but a struggle for community and the corporate expression of the whole Body of Christ.

I found this book attractively written and closely argued. It held my interest with its self-contained chapters, each with useful sub-headings and a list of selected reading for further study. The early chapters give a broad historical survey (chapter two helpfully summarising the characteristics of the Liturgical Movement). The second half of the book examines the interaction of the Movement with the charismatic scene, discusses issues of inclusive language and local cultural expression, and notes areas of reaction and hostility.

Baptists Neville Clark and Stephen Winward gain a brief but worthy mention. Both were outstanding in liturgical development in this country. The whole Movement was at its most influential in the '50's, '60's and '70's. In these more charismatic days, I believe that the 'objectiveness' and deep-rooted scriptural insights of liturgy are still urgently required.

This is a compact work of reference on the Liturgical Movement of this century, readily accessible for the busy minister.

Tom Stobart

***A Passion for Truth* by Alister E McGrath, Apollos 1996, 287 pp. £9.99.**

To anyone aware of the gospel and culture debate, the agenda of this book will be familiar. Briefly, what does evangelicalism have to offer to a post-Enlightenment context? More specifically, Dr McGrath argues for the relevance to the world of academic discipline of an intellectually coherent evangelism, noting a scholarly preference for fernseeds over elephants.

He avoids defining evangelicalism too closely, allowing a collection of groups orbiting around interacting core themes, grounded on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and authority of Scripture. He pitches into liberalism with gusto, charting with something approaching glee its fall from academic grace as the Enlightenment elevation of reason collapses under intellectual scrutiny and weight of human experience. Now we inhabit a world where universals are suspect, a post-liberal and post-modern world characterised by fragmentation. Liberalism was scandalised by the particularity of evangelical truth revealed in Jesus Christ; post-Enlightenment thinkers view the assertion as part of the rainbow nature of truth.

McGrath evaluated the tenets of these rebels against the Enlightenment, adequate to dethrone liberalism but flawed before the searchlight of evangelicalism. Echoes of the lecture hall here, particularly the North American platform, as valuable discussion follows, useful for those who don't know their Foucault from their Derrida. Finally he considers religious pluralism.

This book occasionally accommodates jargon ('self-perpetuating idiolect', p. 54) and its arguments may seem remote to sermon preparation or the process of making disciples, but it shows the sort of intellectual rigour that evangelicals must adopt if they are to be taken seriously by academics. Whether you are convinced by his critique and analysis or not, it is probable that a significant section of the global constituency thinks that the task Dr McGrath has set himself unnecessary, even dangerous, and this rather diffuses his argument for the coherence of evangelicalism.

Stephen Copson.

***Major Themes from Minor Prophets* by Harry Young. Autumn House, 127 pp, £4.99, 1996.**

As the foreword reminds us, the minor prophets are little known documents, often unthumbed pages in our bibles, so it is good to find a book that commends not just the more familiar minor prophets, such as Amos and Jonah, but those whose names often mean little to us.

Young's approach has been to make the book as accessible as possible and with twelve prophets to consider in a short book, even the most succinct writer would be hard pressed to make a valuable contribution. As it is, each prophet is given a 'brief window on his time' which gives some historical background, a suggested theme from the text, and then a number of questions for debate or consideration. This themed approach is littered generously with illustration, paraphrase and rhetoric, but often seems rather superficial and generalised.

This is not an analytical commentary, nor does it explore the riches and diversity of these vibrant passages. It is a courageous attempt to make a neglected area accessible, although much has been sacrificed in the effort. Some may find the book useful as an enthusiastic introduction or to furnish a sermon with some illustrations. However, its most useful place may be for small groups or individuals looking at the minor prophets for the first time.

Sarah Parry

***He Changed Them* by David Porter, Christian Focus Publications. £3.99.**

Encounters with God change us. For some, the most crucial moment is our conversion to Christianity, a turning point which alters the course of our life for ever. For others, the 'moment of truth' may be much later, for we grow and change throughout our Christian lives. Martin Luther's act of nailing a piece of paper to a church door redirected the course of his life. John Bunyan's persecution and imprisonment set him on a career of writing; his books are amongst the most influential ever written. C S Lewis became a renowned apologist for the Christian Faith when he fully grasped the significance of knowing Jesus, the Son of God. Defiance against a cruel and unjust leader was the catalyst which saw Laszio Tokes embark on a saga of imprisonment, torture and persecution before his country, Romania, was liberated.

David Porter has taken ten such characters who have been changed by the power of the gospel and who have helped to bring change through their ministry to thousands. The author has chosen the following - Augustine, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, John Wesley, David Livingstone, D L Moody, Jim Elliot, C S Lewis, Francis Schaeffer and Laszio Tokes - to show how clearly and yet differently God works to change the world through people who will obey Him, no matter what the cost. This book provides wonderful cameos in the life of these characters, which not only inspires but encourages the reader to be bold in the face of opposition, to stand firm on the truths of scripture, so that others may come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour.

Clive Doubleday.

***Cross and Crescent, Responding to the Challenge of Islam*, by Colin Chapman, IVP, 1995, ISBN 0-85110-922-6, pp348, £8.99**

Colin Chapman is well-known as an experienced practitioner and teacher of cross-cultural mission, who is both rooted in the evangelical tradition and sensitive to the complex issues of our plural world, especially the pains of the multi-religious situation of the Middle East. He is currently Principal of Crowther Hall, the CMS college in Birmingham, and is noted as an authority on Islam.

Cross and Crescent is another valuable contribution to cross-cultural understanding which conveys considerable information, some of it the form of outline notes, in an accessible but never over-simple way. In a helpful introduction, he explains the importance of the symbols of the two faiths, and asks whether the word 'challenge' (overworked as he admits) in his sub-title, is really appropriate. He justifies its use since that is how Islam is often perceived by western Christians, and he wants to point to other ways of response to the questions which Islam puts to Christian tradition.

There follow five major sections, beginning with "Knowing our Muslim neighbours", rightly pointing out that relating to people is more important than acquiring information. This section includes material on significant aspects of Islamic culture and the possibilities for Christians in visiting the local mosque. Although drawing on experience of the British scene it also alerts the reader to the Muslim-Christian encounters taking place in many other parts of the world.

The four sections which follow, cover "Understanding Islam", a helpful introduction to Muslim belief and practice; "Entering into Discussion and Dialogue", addressing the main issues that recur in Muslim-Christian encounter; "Facing Fundamental Issues", an account of the key theological questions at stake in Muslim-Christian dialogue; and "Sharing our Faith", some helpful pointers for sensitive witness within

the dialogue with our Muslim neighbours. Each section ends with a brief but helpful bibliography.

This is a book which should appeal to a wide range of people concerned for dialogue and witness in contemporary Britain and beyond. It can be used individually or for group study, but I would suggest that it must be worked through as Chapman has designed it. In other words, those who would simply buy it for the final section on witness need not bother. Only through the sometimes painful processes of meeting, understanding, discussion and dialogue, can the witness be both authentic and effective. Only in this way can we "Walk the way of the cross" - the title of Chapman's brief but telling conclusion.

Nick Wood

Books received.

Hannah Hurnard: The Authorised Biography.
John Wood, Monarch Publications. £6.99.

Going Empty-handed by Ian Cowley, Monarch Publications, £5.99.

Streams of Living Water by Martin Down, Monarch Publications, £4.99.

Food for Life by Pamela M Smith, Monarch Publications, £6.99.