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The Dynamic of Independency

FOR the Baptist Union the May Assembly meetings of 1969 had a symbolic importance which must have been widely appreciated, and which reflected not only the temper of the denomination but also of the wider church. It was also the period when the Anglican-Methodist scheme was being put to the test, while the reverberations of the encyclical "Humanae vitae" were still rumbling round the Roman Catholic church. Within the official deliberations on the floor of the assembly the crucial issue was the relationship of the Union to the organised ecumenical bodies such as the British and World Councils of Churches.¹ This was a matter of confidence for many, especially those who consider these affiliations as compromising the truth of evangelical Baptist witness. While not explicit here was the climax of growing tension between such and those who have been pressing for a restatement of Baptist policy in terms of a fuller corporate understanding of the Church, the acceptance of much that has been learnt from ecumenical encounter and a commitment to renewal for unity.

At the same time, however, there was another element, not fully articulate, certainly not as weighty as yet, nevertheless discernable in certain "fringe" events. This more radical movement, impatient of delays, sitting lightly to tradition, urging openness to new obedience in mission, is to be found more and more widely, often leaving the church as presently organised for the sake of freedom. It is significant that within the Baptist tradition these radicals tend

to find the Baptist understanding of independency important. "The authority of the local Church could provide us with a unique way of contributing to Christian unity" from the manifesto *Baptists for Unity*² and again in *An indication of some present concerns: Summer 1969*³, "the Baptist principle of independency understood today in terms of flexibility to the Spirit's leading in a local situation, is of vital relevance to the whole Church, is a contribution we as Baptists have to come to that whole Church." In view of the current state of Baptist discussion on policy and the tension arising from them (not forgetting possible parallels elsewhere) it is worth commenting further on this third factor.

It is also of interest that the two documents referred to above direct attention to the historical Baptist tradition and claim from it some support for the point of view of being advocated. This is not new, of course, for both the other lines of argument have done the same. On the one hand this can be said to be represented by a book like E. A. Payne's *The Fellowship of Believers*⁴ which wants to emphasise in relation to church policy three factors; the insistence on the need for association and the persistence of this, producing the increasing sense of identity embodied in the growth of the Baptist Union as we know it; the repeated instance of the idea that association is necessary for the true constitution of a church even to the extent of subordination; and thirdly the open attitude that sought the unity, visible, of all Christians. On the other hand, in open reaction to this pattern of thinking, the small booklet put out by the Baptist Revival Fellowship, *Liberty in the Lord*⁵ asserts that "association with, or integration into, a group of churches does not make the local church any more a church than it is already" and at the same time "that the association of churches was based upon carefully defined confessions of faith which were frequently elaborated in considerable detail" making doctrinal formulation a basis for fellowship.

We now have the assertion that independency might allow a greater freedom to respond to the immediate situation than other traditions. What is the justification for this expectation? It must be more than just a revelling in disorder for its own sake. Does it not suggest that there is reason to look again at the tradition, at the seventeenth century, to see if there is not another element that we can now recognise as being equally important alongside and as a corrective to the earlier searches? At this time it cannot be more than an indication as to where it might be worthwhile looking, no more than a hint or two which might be followed up in greater detail and precision.

The pitfalls of non-conformist history in its early days are notorious. One's attitude in this controversy partly depends on the way in which the data is interpreted. Here two assertions have to be made to justify the method adopted. The first is that both in terms of origin and the gradual emergence of distinct groups and in their

attitudes Baptists cannot be treated apart from the generality of separatism or independency.⁶ Secondly it is possible to trace from the earliest separatist groups (c1590) through to the period of the Great Persecution (1662-1689) a gradual crystallising of the various strands that were to emerge in their familiar form.⁷ If one takes, as it were, a cross section at any particular stage, the later it is the more definite are the denominational patterns. It matters very much at which stage in this process the ideal is thought to obtain. Persecution, controversy, political activity and many other factors influence the story. Here it is suggested that it is important to look at some of the motivation underlying the moves into separatism that became lost or fossilised with the need to justify and maintain the position. Thus, while arguing from what appears to be generally accepted, the contentions seems to be more valid for the earlier period.

G. F. Nuttall points out that one of the keys to the understanding of the seventeenth century is to recognise that it was widely assumed that a new age had dawned. "It is not possible to understand . . . many (other) Puritan tendencies . . . unless we realise that many Puritans believed themselves to be living in a remarkable age, a new age, perhaps the last age . . ."⁸ The extravagances of the Fifth Monarchy men, the Levellers, Diggers and other extremist groups may have deserved condemnation and roused the fear of Anabaptist excesses, but they could not have been so widespread, nor indeed respected in many ways, if such an expectation had not been general. Especially among the more radical Puritans it was assumed that the Holy Spirit had broken into history in a way to inaugurate a fresh era of time. This meant a shift in the experience of history from a static sense into a sense of progress, that God moves through the ages creating and recreating. The past reveals this to have happened, and there is every reason to suggest that for God to achieve his purposes will mean similar developments in history. ". . . This power (which is God) comes forth and offers itself in a diversity of appearance, and still (by divine progress in the affairs of the earth) moves from one to another; from one dispensation to another, from one party to another; hereby accomplishing his eternally decreed design in and upon the creative. This is manifest in all dispensations, civil and spiritual".⁹ While there were innumerable interpretations of what was commonly felt even sober and moderate men could not miss the sense of excitement. It seemed that the hopes and aspirations of the prophets of reform had had their labours crowned by the triumph of the Commonwealth. Even Milton talked of the "age of ages wherein God is manifestly come down among us to do some remarkable good".¹⁰

It also meant a new eschatological dimension in history, for the present could be but the last preparation time before the end. The present is made meaningful in relation to the striving towards the end. Thus there was an acute realisation that we are *in via*, leaving

behind past achievements and pressing towards the ultimate goal. There is no stopping place in history where one can say that nothing more can be said or done. We must press down the road of reformation. Hence John Robinson, on his farewell speech to the Pilgrim Fathers (1620), could assume that they were the pioneers into the future pushing back the frontiers of God's historical will and at the same time regret that others have decided to remain behind. "As, for example, the Lutherans, they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; . . . the Calvinists stick where he (Calvin) left them; a misery much to be lamented; for though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God hath not revealed his whole will to them; and were they now living . . . they would be as willing to embrace further light."¹¹

Such an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit immediately has radical consequences. It seems that the Presbyterians did not share these convictions, but were rather more concerned with the imposition on the church of the Biblical pattern as they saw it from the works of Calvin. Indeed this extremer attitude was dubbed as antinomian, liable to lead to chaos and unbridled freedom. Hence Baxter's remark "The Antinomians were commonly Independents".¹² The independents and those more radical claimed that there must be a true and undistorted communion between the believer and God. The light is real light. The tension comes out in the way in which the Scriptures, now open to every man, are interpreted. Conservatives tended to insist on the priority of Scripture and the boundaries of legitimate interpretation, while radicals, such as the Quakers, asserted that the "inner light" could reinterpret and extrapolate beyond the sense of Scripture. Nevertheless there was a general understanding that the believer had the right and should expect the Word to come alive in a personal and compelling way. This was the work of the Spirit. "There must be a double light. So there must be a Spirit in me as there is a Spirit in the Scriptures before I can see anything".¹³ It is worth emphasising, however, that the desire to free the Scriptures from the accretions of tradition and official interpretation was not merely to allow a literalistic copying of New Testament practice (though this was often considered important, not least among Baptists) but so that the Spirit might be freed, that the Word could speak, a *reculer pour mieux sauter* into the present situation.

In terms of the life of the Church the dominating question must be "where is God leading us next?" At a time of ferment and unease that must always be an experimental question, one of believing and testing, of acting on the sincere promptings of the inner conscience. Such too was the mood of the "new learning" that was to revolutionise our way of thinking which went along with "experimental religion".¹⁴ John Robinson's famous words to the Pilgrim Fathers sums this mood up: "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Holy Word". This was an affirmation

that they were right to set out into new paths and also the belief that God is ever leading his people on. The Church and the Christian was always called to re-examine itself and to change as new truth was vouchsafed. "This bold principle of mutability" is an essential part of the separatist tradition. So John Smyth could say "We are in constant error: my earnest desire is that my last writing may be taken as my present judgement". And John Robinson boldly asks whether "If God have caused a further truth like a light in a dark place to shine in our hearts" whether there can be any hesitation in rejecting the old and entering the new.¹⁵ So it is not surprising to find a sense of divine compulsion and quest. L. G. Champion makes the correct emphasis when he says: "Dissenters moved over into their separatist partitions not on account of their negative rejection of what they judged to be false, but because of the inward compulsion, the inward obedience to the divine word which left them no choice but to do what they did".¹⁶ Perhaps among Baptists one very familiar example which could be multiplied is the story of the origins of the Broadmead Church, Bristol.¹⁷ Led by the formidable Mrs. Hazzard, a number of "professors" began by forming a class within the parish for mutual edification. Gradually through common concern and canonical intransigence they found themselves moving away from the parish church, first by searching for "godly ministers", then by rejecting the Prayer Book and finally into complete separation. But it should be noted that not everyone went the whole journey. Only five covenanted originally to become a conventicle in 1640 though earlier there are larger numbers mentioned at various levels of Puritanical protest. The journey through several stages was normal, but the compelling thing was not so much unanimity as the conscience of the individual or group. Similarly, John Smyth's followers found that at different stages there were some who fell out, joining other groups who had different practices. In the end Smyth himself was left behind by Helwys.¹⁸

The life of the Church comes from within the experience and faith of Christians. This cannot be imposed or controlled from outside, nor can it be choked, but will always burst the cage by which it is imprisoned. This was the reason for rejecting the Church of England. Not that there are not saints within the established Church but that the magistrate imposed an official uniformity.¹⁹ It is a reason that goes beyond the Presbyterian demand for a further reform. At the same time the "principle of mutability" can and has sometimes led into a spiritual solipsism in which group is barricaded against group, splitting into smaller and smaller sects each more sure of its own rightness than the last. But this was neither the intention nor the necessary end product. Ironically the same concern that led to separation was also the reason for limiting its effects.

John Owen, the great systematic protagonist for independency,

argued that the elect will always be found in visible companies. This is part of the nature of being a believer. Thus the Church will be visible and as such must be greater than any one denomination or tradition or national heritage. There is bound to be a wide range of differences and divergences which should not be deemed insuperable barriers. Rather these variations, though not indifferent, show the multiple workings of the Holy Spirit. While recognising that some differences make deep fellowship impossible that which unites is stronger than that which divides, and the consummation towards which we are striving will see the end of all stumbling blocks. In a remarkably modern passage he says: "Whatever shame, therefore, we are forced to bear in differences with or divisions from the members of this (i.e. universal) church, as it is a continual sorrow and trouble unto us, so we acknowledge it to be our duty to endeavour after the strictest communion with them in all spiritual things that the gospel doth require or whereof our condition in this world is capable. In the meantime, until that can be obtained, it is our desire to manage the profession of our own light and apprehensions without bitterness, clamour, evil speaking or anything that may be irregular in ourselves or give just cause for offence to others. Our prayers are also continually for the spiritual prosperity of this church, for its increase in faith and holiness, for the healing of all breaches that are among them that belong there unto throughout all the world".²⁰ Similarly, the Amsterdam Confession of the church led by John Smyth reads at article 69: "That all penitent and faithful Christians are brethren on the communion of the outward church, wheresoever they live, by whatsoever name they are known, which in truth and zeal, follow repentance and faith, though compassed with never so many ignorances and infirmities; and we salute them all with a holy Kiss, being heartily grieved that we which follow after on faith . . . should be rent into so many sects and schisms: and that only for matters of less moment". E. A. Payne comments: "A noble spirit breathes through this last clause and the words deserve to be far better known than they are".²¹

If, therefore, there is a universal recognition of all the faithful there must nevertheless be in practice some limitations "where of our condition in this world is capable" in terms of fellowship as well as geographical proximity. There will be a gradation in the intensity and closeness possible between different Christians whether technically of the same tradition or not, but there should not be either a loss of contact or hope. John Robinson allowed, as was not uncommon, that even a false church like the Church of England, contained many Christians.²² It is well known that many Baptists could join with others despite differences over baptism as well as other points. A letter from the church in Hexham to the so called Jacob church in London reads: "We can own unbaptised churches and ministers for Churches and ministers of Christ:

though we also judge in those churches and ministers something as to order wanting which God in his own way may reveal to them".²³

Indeed the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church is an interesting example how a group may feel compelled to divide over matters of grave concern and yet be able to a large extent to keep the bonds of charity and peace unbroken.²⁴ The congregation, founded by Jacob in 1616 was "semi-independent" in that it did not cut itself off entirely from the parish system. As time passed rigorist tendencies grew within the fellowship and the congregation dismissed (i.e. recognised) those that founded the first Particular Baptist Church in 1633. Later, in 1640, under Jessey, the congregation having grown, there was a deliberate dividing even though out of this a further Baptist group emerged. Indeed we seem to have a number of parallel congregations each given freedom in a close association. Jessey himself was immersed even though he did not join a Baptist congregation. This sort of relationship between congregations is neatly summarised in an agreement between five Oxfordshire churches, made at Tetsworth in 1653. "There is a like relation betwix particular members of one church. For the churches of Christ do all make up but one body or church in general under Christ their head . . . And in his body there is to be schism, which is then found when all members have not the same care over one another".²⁵ This care includes the building up of one another in Christ, the sharing of each other's burden and the recognition of each other's gifts.

The early Puritans laid great stress on the inner witness of the Holy Spirit which included the recognition of kindred spirits in Christ. This was not dependent on doctrinal rectitude or similarity of practice though these naturally were very important factors. Rather it was that deep inward knowledge that across the divide between personalities a link was forged that can only be described in terms of the presence of Christ. This "fellowship of the Spirit" was central to the thought of groups like the Quakers who demanded that the group wait on the Spirit, but was not neglected by others. "There is" wrote Baxter, "a connaturality of Spirit in the saints that will work by sympathy and by closing uniting inclinations through greater differences and impediments . . . as a load stone will exercise its attractive force through a wall".²⁶

This experience of fellowship was also to be central to the formation of the congregation. The societary nature of the church which meant that believers came together in covenant could only be possible because they had already found themselves members of the household of faith as well as being drawn together at this place, in this time in this way.²⁷

Lastly, attention should be drawn to the demand for toleration. The Baptists are justifiably proud of Helwys' plea of 1612²⁸ but they were eventually not alone in this. Nor was this indifference, or a minority asking to be allowed to exist. It was part of the

"Liberty of the Spirit". As Cromwell wrote of his daughter: "And thus to be a seeker is to be of the best sect next to a finder: and such a one shall every faithful humble seeker be at the end".²⁹ Nor was this at the expense of truth. The seventeenth century produced its own fair share of controversy and invective, but it was not necessarily a cause for severing relationships. Perhaps a rougher, more violent and honest age could understand this better than we.

Many of the issues that concern us today have very close and interesting parallels in the experience and thought of the first independents. They were interested in history because they saw the world changing in front of their eyes with all that means in fear and bewilderment, hopes and opportunities. They were therefore compelled to invest history with theological content and to seek the path of the Spirit in a confused world. They were, also challenged to walk in new untrodden paths, to create a church for the new age. They had to answer the problem of the tension between order and chaos, of the reformer and the traditionalist, of the pioneer and the generality of men, in such a way as to hold the two together. It may be that they did not in fact or even in theory succeed but a brave attempt was made of which we are the heirs, which no one can ignore.

Perhaps, therefore, it is not foolishness to suggest that were this tradition taken seriously, despite its shortcomings the ecumenical enterprise might be the richer. There is always a fear of disorder and freedom, but this is a call to an ordered freedom. Also it demands a recognition that in matters of faith there cannot in the end be compulsion or a tidy solution to which everyone is bound, but only movement, experiment, freedom for life. We must start from the core of the faith, the experience of Christ. The rest has to be left unsolved, though not neglected. To those within the tradition two things must be said. First that if we take ourselves seriously the traditions, institutions and familiar landmarks have no permanency. Nor is it legitimate to regard those who would hasten change as iconoclasts. The history of the Baptists has been kaleidoscopic all along. There should be no surprise in finding a new pattern coming into being. Secondly, the experience of the early separatists should encourage those who find themselves impelled forward, while not breaking fellowship or acting rashly, to act in faith. At the same time the reality of the communion of saints will be found in support and companionship that may appear from unexpected quarters.

NOTES

¹ The crucial motion was that recommending the Union to retain its affiliations based on the arguments and evidence found in *Baptists and Unity*, Baptist Union (received by the Council March 1967).

² *Baptists and Unity Reviewed*. A report to the Council (March 1969). (March 1968) published privately by a group of Midland ministers from which has grown the "Baptist Renewal Group" soon to be affiliated into "One" the newly formed ecumenical renewal group.

³ A single sheet delineating areas of concern which can provide a focal point for discussion and action within the Baptist Renewal Group.

⁴ Carey Kingsgate 1947—revised 1952 *cf.* chap. 2 "The Visible Church". As with all movements and tides of opinion it is hard to define and identify this ecumenically orientated wing. It includes in various ways both radicals and conservative evangelicals. This is possible because the W.C.C. is open-ended and does not commit one to a specific stance, though there are severe strains over certain issues. It is a pity that ecumenical participation has often been equated with particular attitudes. Nevertheless there has been a significant contribution from those who acknowledge their desire to move nearer to other traditions: for example, over church policy: A. Gilmore: *The Patterns of the Church* (Lutterworth 1962); Northern Association: *The Way Ahead* (1960); Over baptism: A. Gilmore: *Christian Baptism* (Lutterworth 1959); G. R. Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament* (McMillan 1963); over forms of worship: S. Winward: *The Reformation of our Worship* (Carey Kingsgate 1964); N. Clark: *Call to Worship* (SCM 1960).

⁵ (1964) quotations from pp. 17-18. This group represents the attitudes of the conservative evangelicals who regard any possible compromise with suspicion, especially if associated with "catholic" emphases. But once more there is no absolute homogeneity, opinions ranging from loyalty to the Union and participation in ecumenical encounter to a very frigid fundamentalism and semi-isolationist attitudes. Most Baptists, it should be added, would be found in neither contending camp but perplexedly in the middle.

⁶ One is aware of the question of the interrelation of the various groups but accepts the general conclusion of scholars like: G. F. Nuttall: *Visible Saints* (Blackwell, 1957) p.7; *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and experience* (Blackwell, 1946) p.13. E. A. Payne: *Free Churchmen: Unrepentant and Repentant* (Carey Kingsgate, 1965) chap. 7: "Baptist—Congregational Relationships." R. T. Jones: *Congregationalism in England* (Independent Press 1962) *cf.* Introduction.

⁷ This is interestingly illustrated by B. R. White: "The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644" (*Journal of Theological Studies* XIX. 2. 1968. pp. 570ff where he traces the dependence of the 1644 document on the 1596 Amsterdam Confession and comments: "It seems that the men of 1644 had a narrower, less hopeful view of their cause than those of 1596".

⁸ Nuttall: *Holy Spirit*, p.102. *cf.* C. Hill: *Puritanism and Revolution* Secker and Warberg 1965 chapter 12.

⁹ Salmon: *A rout, a rout* (1649) quoted Nuttall: *Holy Spirit*. p. 105.

¹⁰ Nuttall: *Holy Spirit*, p. 104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.113.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.60 and 114.

¹³ R. Sibbes, quoted Nuttall: *Holy Spirit*, p. 23 with the comment: "Sibbes is a fair representative of the general Puritan approach in this, as in several other subjects."

¹⁴ Nuttall: *Holy Spirit*, p.4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁶ L. G. Champion. *Baptists and Unity* (Mowbray, 1962) p. 13.

¹⁷ For summaries see e.g. Nuttall: *Visible Saints*, p. 45f. Champion: *Baptists and Unity*. Walton: *Gathered Community*, p. 60f.

¹⁸ *Cf.* A. C. Underwood: *A History of the English Baptists* (Kingsgate 1947) p. 33—48.

¹⁹ *Cf.* Nuttall: *Visible Saints*, chapter 3

²⁰ John Owen: "Discourse concerning evangelical love, church peace and unity" (1672). Edition: Standard Library of British Divines (1851) p. 80.

²¹ Payne: *Fellowship*, p. 24.

²² Jones: *Congregationalism*, p. 22.

²³ Walton: *Gathered Community*, p. 85.

²⁴ Cf. White, article as cited, Underwood: *History*, p. 57f. Nuttall: *Visible Saints*, p. 199f.

²⁵ Cited in White article,

²⁶ Nuttall: *Visible Saints*, p. 70ff.

²⁷ Nuttall: *Visible Saints*, p. 70ff.

²⁸ Underwood: *History*, p. 47f.

²⁹ Nuttall: *Holy Spirit*, p. 115, cf. p. 113 and 118 ff. *Visible Saints*, p. 121.

P. H. BALLARD

PRIZE ESSAY

THE Committee of the Baptist Historical Society has decided to offer a prize of £30 for an essay in English Baptist history. The conditions of entry are as follows:

1. Essays may only be submitted by members of the Baptist Historical Society.
2. Entries should not exceed 10,000 words excluding footnote references.
3. Subjects may include any aspect of English Baptist History before 1918.
4. The Judges shall normally be the President and Secretary of the Society together with the Editor of the *Baptist Quarterly* and any others whose assistance they shall seek.
5. The closing date for the entry of essays for the prize shall be 31st December, 1971.
6. The winning contribution shall, at the discretion of the Committee of the Baptist Historical Society, be published in the *Quarterly*.
7. The Judges' decisions concerning the suitability and quality of the entries shall be final.