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Baptists and the Ministry

WHEN it was suggested that I should speak* on "The Baptist Concept of the Ministry", I remembered a remark of Carnegie Simpson, a shrewd and formidable Presbyterian of an earlier generation, to whom the Free Churches owe the still-valuable Declaratory Statement of Common Faith and Practice adopted when the Federal Council was formed in 1917. A Church, said Carnegie Simpson, has no right to have distinctive principles; it should only have Christian principles. And so I said I would rather speak today under the title "Baptists and the Ministry". No doubt different groups of Christians have differed in their emphases, their usages, and their interpretations, but basically they are all of them—however great their variety—dealing with the functioning of that divine-human society, the Body of Christ, the Church, to which we all hope we belong.

There are still wide differences between the denominations in the way they operate their church structures and in the doctrines with which they defend their practice. But the Faith and Order discussions of the past fifty years have resulted in a large measure of agreement on what is being aimed at and a considerable convergence of thought among theologians of all traditions—a convergence covering the doctrine of the Church, its ministry and its sacraments. This has not been easily achieved, as those will know who have shared in or followed the discussions at, say, the Faith and Order Conferences at Lausanne (1927), Edinburgh (1937), Lund (1952), and Montreal (1963)—or simply the church union negotiations here in Britain. But the progress towards common understanding has, in fact, been very striking. It is forty-four years since the Lausanne Faith and Order Conference approached, with what E. S. Woods called "bated breath", "perhaps the most thorny of all the subjects . . . that of the Ministry". It is twenty-five years since, under the direction of the then Bishop of Oxford (Dr. Kenneth Kirk) a book of essays appeared with the title *The Apostolic Ministry.* It sought to argue that the episcopate derived directly by divine ordinance from the twelve Apostles, and was intended to have "as permanent a place in the Church as the institution of the Eucharist", and that all other orders and forms of ministry were secondary and derivative, and many of them "invalid". The late Professor T. W. Manson effectively challenged these claims in a much more slender volume entitled *The Church's Ministry* (1948). But all this debate now seems far behind us. The Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, still claims, I believe, that "it is theologically certain that the threefold gradation of Bishop, Priest and Deacon is part of the unalterable, divine constitution of the Church". But he has been answered by that other Roman Catholic professor, the redoubtable Hans Küng, of Tübingen, in the latter's striking book, *The*

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Church. The section on "The Offices of the Church" begins with an emphatic assertion of the "Priesthood of All Believers". Küng has moved far away from the traditional Catholic position on these matters, and in his most recent book, *Infallibility?*, questions the Papal position itself. We do well, however, to remember that a hierarchical structure has played a big part in the preservation of the faith in periods of upheaval, war, and persecution, and that the modern Ecumenical Movement would hardly have got off the ground without Archbishops Söderblom, Germanos, and Temple.

I venture to repeat, in summary form, four points I made a dozen years ago in an article on "The Ministry in Historical Perspective" (*Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XVII, 1958, p. 256). The article attracted some favourable attention at the time, outside as well as within the denomination. The points can, I think, be made with even greater confidence today.

1. *There is no uniform pattern of ministry in the New Testament or one intended to be the norm for all time.* As the present Archbishop of Canterbury said a good many years ago: "To burrow in the New Testament for forms of ministry and imitate them is archaeological religion" (*The Gospel and the Catholic Church,* 1936, p. 69). Beside that quotation one can now set this from Professor Küng: "The New Testament offers no fixed and exclusive catalogue of . . . permanent ministries within the community which would be valid for all communities" (*The Church,* 1968, p. 395).

2. *It is clear that the varied forms and patterns of ministry—and the theologies offered as their justification*—in the early Christian centuries, in the Middle Ages, at the time of the Reformation, and more recently—*have all been influenced—and indeed shaped—by external factors*, by political and social conditions, as well as by the general ecclesiastical situation at particular times and in particular places. Necessarily and rightly, the Churches have adapted their structures to the needs of the hour in order to fulfil their mission. Surely, this is not unrelated to what our Lord said about the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

3. *No structure has proved perfect.* None (our own included) has been able to prevent abuses. But none has failed entirely as a medium for the grace of God and help in nurturing Christian character. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3. 23). All have shared in nurturing saints. It is salutary to remember this, when we are tempted either to make arrogant claims for our own structures or to abandon them for someone else's.

4. *What then are the functions of a specialised ministry?* What is it that is asked of those placed in office? First, the guardianship and proclamation of the faith; secondly, the leadership of the worship of the Church and, in particular, the reverent administration and in some sense the authentication of the sacraments; thirdly, a constant witnessing to and safeguarding of the unity, continuity, and universality of the People of God; fourthly, the shepherding of the flock (Karl

Barth said once: "God help the preacher who does not take his people more seriously than they take themselves"); and fifthly, the setting of a personal example as "men of God" and "patterns to the flock" (1 Peter 5, 3). None of these things is the exclusive prerogative of those ordained as ministers. None of these things can be effectively carried out without the support of the community as a whole. But none of the ministerial functions I have mentioned can be easily achieved or lightly undertaken. They require individuals specially committed to them. They require discipline and training for their exercise. Men and women who undertake these tasks must feel a strong inward constraint of the Spirit. They must seek to prepare themselves. Their sense of call and their gifts must be tested and recognised by their fellow-believers for they are to act on their behalf and in their name. Of these things there can surely be no doubt. Luther says: "All Christians are Priests; true, but they are not all parsons".

What have Baptists made of all this? In the reply of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland to the Lambeth Appeal of 1920 this sentence occurs: "The ministry is for us a gift of the Spirit to the Church, and is an office involving both the inward call of God and the commission of the Church"—a sentence with which no denomination and only a few anarchic individuals would disagree. In the context of the Baptist reply to Lambeth the word "Church" seems to mean simply a local company of believers, who are described as "both enabled and responsible for self-government through His indwelling Spirit Who supplies wisdom, love and power, and Who, as we believe, leads these communities to associate freely in wider organisations for fellowship and the propagation of the Gospel". Only if it is recognised that one of the main purposes of the association together of local congregations has been the proper recognition and training of the ministry do I believe that these last phrases are true to the history and to the outlook of the Baptist movement as a whole.

This is not the occasion for any lengthy or detailed excursions into Baptist history but I would draw your attention to the fact that our earliest records make clear that the Baptist congregations of the mid-17th century felt the need to associate together and that one of the chief of the tasks they undertook together was the seeking out and authorising of "able ministers". (See the *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, Part I, 1971, edited by Dr. B. R. White). As soon as the days of persecution were over and the Toleration Act of 1689 had been passed, a General Assembly was called by the Particular Baptist leaders. One of its chief aims was "the raising up of an able and honourable ministry". The pastors, elders, and messengers agreed to appeal for a general fund, to be raised as a free-will offering in amounts of ½d, 1d, 2d, 3d, 4d or 6d per week "more or less", for the purpose of providing ministers for churches not able to maintain their own; to send out ministers as evangelists; and thirdly, "to assist those members . . . in any of the aforesaid churches (i.e., con-

tributing churches) that are disposed for study, have an inviting gift and are sound in fundamentals, in attaining to the knowledge and understanding of the languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew" (Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists,* I, 491-492).

In other words, a basic reason for linking together local congregations is the provision of ministers—their discovery, their training, their recognition, their deployment. John Rippon, who knew a good deal about early Baptist history, says that as early as 1650 John Tombes had had candidates for the ministry under his care in Leominster, and that, immediately after the 1689 appeal, a beginning was made with the training of men in Bristol, a beginning which received a great fillip from the famous bequest of Edward Terrill, of the Broadmead church—a bequest which helped to provide the oldest of our Baptist theological colleges.

In the 18th century a considerable number of Baptists went for training to the Dissenting Academies, and some to the Universities of Scotland and Holland. That in the 19th century a denomination as relatively small as ours should have established—in addition to Bristol—ministerial colleges in Horton (later Rawdon) (1804), Abergavenny (1807), Stepney (1810), Pontypool (1836), Haverfordwest (1839), Regent's Park (1856), at Spurgeon's Tabernacle (1856), and in Llangollen (1862), moved to Bangor (1892), Bury (1866), and Glasgow (1894), is evidence of how seriously ministerial training was treated. In the 20th century Baptists have moved one of these colleges to Oxford where it has become a Permanent Private Hall of the University. That in the British Isles there are still eight Baptist colleges may throw some doubt on our common-sense, but it cannot call in question our concern for the proper preparation of those who believe themselves—and are believed by others—to be called to be ministers. Admittedly, there have sometimes been in our ranks those who have despised human learning and have set it in opposition to spiritual understanding but they have never been given shrift for very long.

There are other important facts to be noted. When a minister is ordained or recognised as pastor of a local church, wherever he may have come from, the presence of other ministers has been expected, that they may examine (or at least hear) a man's statement of his beliefs; that they may pray for his endowment with the Holy Spirit; that they may exhort both him and the members now being committed to his charge. There are considerable and important theological implications in this practice, virtually universal among us. We have always claimed that external circumstances must not deny a congregation the right to have church officers and to have the blessing of the sacraments, though in the case of the Lord's Supper there are interesting examples of very long periods of waiting for the properly ordained persons. By and large, however, it is clear that we, no less than other Christian traditions, have believed that ministerial fitness must be

tested, and that it is likely to be tested best, though not exclusively, by those already in that office.

Further, it is clear that individual ministers and churches have seldom believed that they ought to act in matters of settlement and removal entirely independently of other Baptist churches. The oft-quoted example of Andrew Fuller is not unique. He had been pastor of the Soham Church for more than four years when Kettering first sought him. It was not until three years later, and then only after consultations in Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, and London, that he felt it right to remove there. Similarly, when John Ryland was invited to leave Northampton for Bristol. These were not thought of as private decisions. They were seen as a corporate search for the will of God for His people.

This has also been the purpose of what the various Baptist Unions have done in the matter of ministerial recognition and support. As early as 1846 the secretary of the Baptist Union (which had been formed in London in 1812, called a Conference on Ministerial Training. An annual Handbook or Manual was being planned. It would have in it lists of churches and ministers. Which and who should be included and on what basis? These questions lie behind the various stages which have led to the present rules for Ministerial Recognition. Similar considerations have found expression in the regulations of the Baptist Union of Wales. In neither case are they always strictly observed or the reasons for them at once understood. In both cases they are attempts to safeguard Christian congregations and individuals against treating ministerial office lightly and irreverently. We, like others, have discovered the truth of Richard Baxter's remark: "All churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall (not in riches or worldly grandeur) but in knowledge, zeal and ability for their work".

You may well be asking, however, how far all this has adequate relevance to the situation in which we find ourselves today. Several years ago Richard Niebuhr spoke of the ministry as "the perplexed profession". Recently, four able and eager men, all in middle life, and belonging to three different denominations, but two of them Baptists, joined in a volume of essays entitled *Ministry in Question* (1971). One of them (not a Baptist) quotes a well-known Methodist as saying: "We are witnessing the disappearance of a profession, but cannot bring ourselves to admit it." (p. 4). Within the last few years the British Council of Churches has produced two reports—*The Shape of the Ministry* (1965) and *Pastoral Care and the Training of Ministers* (1968)—which show how widespread is the perplexity and uncertainty. The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland received in 1970 a particularly challenging report on *Ministry Tomorrow*. This put forward a number of proposals which have caused a good deal of discussion and concern. Many have felt that the group which drew up the report were influenced too much by financial considerations; had had insufficient experience of how our smaller congregations function; and

that their proposals for a two-tier ministry, the top fully trained and remunerated and being strictly limited in number, would prove extremely difficult to implement. Be that as it may, the report contains the claim that "crucial to the health of the Church is that ministry which builds up the Body and equips the saints for their work of ministry in and to the world" (p. 7).

It is true, of course, that we have to face the characteristics and problems of the late 20th century, and not those of the time of Paul, or Ignatius, or Cyprian, or Augustine, or Luther or Calvin, or our 19th century forebears. Let us set down some of these characteristics fairly and frankly. I mention six:

1. The *Christian framework*, intellectual and religious, out of which came much of our present ecclesiastical and ministerial structure, has been undermined. It presumed a knowledge of, and faith in, the Bible and the main Christian doctrines which have disappeared among large numbers of our fellow-countrymen. But it must be confessed that much of that knowledge and acceptance had become very superficial and conventional.

2. There are *fewer candidates for the Christian ministry* than there were. This is no doubt partly due to the lack of security and the depressed financial status of the office in comparison with other professions, but this is only *part* of the explanation. There is doubt as to whether the forms of ministry recently customary provide the best way of serving God and/or man. In these circumstances, the remarkable thing is that so many still find themselves under constraint to seek service as ministers and that of these, so many come from families and homes which are not closely associated with the Church.

3. *Ministerial training is more difficult*, partly because one has often to start farther back with Biblical, theological and historical instruction than used to be the case; partly because so many candidates are already married or wish to be as soon as possible; and partly because the small college is no longer easy to maintain. But a rethinking and re-ordering of activities in face of these things is certainly not necessarily all loss. There are things in our curricula which can safely be unloaded (at least for the time being). The training of men and women together has advantages, even if it also presents difficulties. A small seminary, shut away from the intellectual challenges of the time, is not likely to be the best training ground for the ministers of the Church. But there are now very few such seminaries.

4. *What is expected of many ministers* has changed, and the student needs to be introduced, either during his college days or by in-service training shortly afterwards, to new areas of information and new skills of various kinds, if he is to minister effectively in modern society, whether in urban or rural areas. He must know about the social services (even if not sociology). He must have some specialised training to be a satisfactory hospital or industrial chaplain (even if an academic course in normal and abnormal psychology cannot be provided). He must once more become a "person" in the community, a

parson in the original sense. But this does not mean that it is wise to water down too far what we expect the man in the pulpit to know about the Bible and about Christian belief and experience, even the man who doesn't like a pulpit, but is eager for "pastoral counselling". "A middlin' doctor is a poor thing; a middlin' lawyer is a poor thing; but save me from a middlin' man of God".

5. Our *population is being re-housed* on a large scale in new towns, rebuilt towns and new housing estates. We are becoming a *multi-racial* society, a pluralist one so far as religion is concerned. And the *gap between the generations*, which there has always been, has widened and deepened in many places. But these things give the Churches the chance to start again, getting away from out-dated buildings and patterns of worship which no longer have life in them. They give the Churches the chance "to preach the good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4, 18-19) rather more clearly than they have done for a generation or so. It is not, of course, easy. We have a good many mill-stones round our necks and beams in our eyes, and we have to adapt ourselves to an age which likes looking rather than listening, and arguing rather than accepting. But this is a day when, as in the past, crisis may mean opportunity.

6. *Denominational attachment is no longer so strong and compelling as it once was*. Indeed, there are few in any denomination who would now claim that they and they alone had the full understanding of the purpose of God and the means for mediating His grace. We live in an ecumenical age, and will only be able to fulfil our mission if we undertake it with our fellow-Christians. But if what I said earlier is right, this is something to be glad about. Ecumenical understanding and co-operation is a difficult and costly business. Professor Zander, one of the Russian Orthodox exiles in Paris, used to speak about "the bitter joy of ecumenical communion". I have often thought about the phrase in many different parts of the world. We are called to recognise as "brothers" those who seem to us to be queer, suspicious, even heretical. This Christian obligation is upon us in regard to fellow-Baptists with whom we disagree, and those of other Christian traditions. But we know now that our divisions and differences are within the one People of God.

If these are some of the chief features of the present situation, then what we and all other denominations need is "men of God" who are, as the Apostle Paul put it, *artios* (2 Timothy 3, 17). The translators have found it difficult to get the right English equivalent—perfect (AV), complete (RSV.RV), adequate (Goodspeed), proficient (Moffatt), efficient (NEB), fully equipped (Jerusalem Bible). The passage in which the word occurs justifies J. B. Phillips' rendering: "The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of the man of God, and fit him fully for all branches of his work".

That must surely be the basis, as today Roman Catholics are

discovering. But if so, one comes back to the five basic functions of the specialised ministry about which I spoke earlier: (1) the guardianship and proclamation of the faith; (2) leadership in worship; (3) witnessing to the unity, continuity and universality of the faith; (4) shepherding the flock, and (5) personal example, all of them directed to the confrontation of men and women with Jesus Christ, centre and Lord of History and the Church. Baptists, like others, know that these things are still essential to the healthy, on-going life of the People of God.

In this country—but not only in this country—recent decades have been a testing and disheartening time for most ministers. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick". But Christian history assures us that the tide of faith turns and returns, though we cannot calculate the times and seasons as we can those of the oceans. Two years ago in America, even in the Southern States, I was conscious of a loss of nerve by Christian leaders, which was in sharp contrast with the buoyant, almost aggressive, confidence of a decade or so ago. But one of the most experienced and knowledgeable of American Churchmen said to me a few days ago that he was increasingly confident about the years ahead. There is, he said, a new realism and promise of renewal in the American churches. A few days later, in an article on the most recent developments, I read: "It is a fact that our parking lot is more crowded on Sundays than it was a year ago". (*Christian Century*, 8.9.71.) You young men may experience something similar here—prepare!

Let me close by reading you a striking, almost lyrical, passage from the book, *Ministry in Question*, to which I referred. It is from the essay by Neville Clark. These words are, I believe, true, and they would be echoed, I am sure, by those of most other Christian traditions:

> "The ministry are God's court-jesters. In word and life and action they embody the crazy, incredible paradox of redemption, whispering the story to those who will listen, singing it to those who will rejoice, re-enacting it in the incongruity of worship. Their wild buffoonery overturns the familiar and the expected, and somehow opens a window into a looking-glass world, a Kingdom unknown yet well-known, where only the childlike are at home. They tug at the heartstrings with a mad message that has taken possession of them and must constantly be relived and retold. They come as emissaries from another existence, proffering glimpses of a fantastic reality, which remain to haunt the human heart. They play out the strange part assigned to them, contradicting all the conventional assumptions and expectations, planting absurdity at the heart of the commonplace, lifting tragedy into the laughter of heaven, ushering on stage a strange, new wondrous world. And they must continue to perform, even when their hearts are breaking. For they are the fools of God." (p. 52)

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