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## Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life

**H**ISTORICAL studies may afford a pleasant escape from the pressures of a contemporary situation characterised by turbulence and change, or they may offer a measure of illumination and guidance by which the changes may be evaluated and positive responses made. Into which of these categories this paper will fall I leave to your merciful judgment at its conclusion, though I confess at the outset that my concern is with the relationship of the historical and the contemporary.

The contemporary situation is one in which changes are affecting radically the forms of human society as a whole as well as the patterns and structures of thought and life in the Christian church. Baptists live in this situation. Consequently we have to face the fact that structures of church life, familiar to many of us throughout our lives and to several generations which preceded us, are changing and will continue to change. We ask therefore whether there is any period in Baptist history from which we may derive some guidelines relevant to our situation.

Now if any period or person which is the centre of historical study is to be associated in this way with the present situation there must be a living relationship between them. The choice of the historical period must not be haphazard nor must we look for a period possessing striking similarities to the present bringing an inevitable temptation to force or even to falsify the evidence. An authentic relationship is required such as that which exists between the root and the fruits of a tree.

What era in Baptist history or what persons and events in the past stand in this required, living relationship with the present?

I suggest that this condition is fulfilled by the half century between 1775 and 1825. This period covers the active ministries of Andrew Fuller, John Ryland, John Sutcliffe, Samuel Pearce, William Carey, the last sixteen years of Robert Hall, senior, and all but six years of his son. During this period occurred the formation of the B.M.S., of the Bible Society, of the Baptist Union and of a number of our colleges. Ivimey makes the judgment that the year 1779 "was the commencement of a new era in the history of our denomination"<sup>1</sup> and he offers as evidence the sermon which Robert Hall of Arnesby preached that year in College Lane, Northampton, and which was published in 1781 as *Help to Zions Travellers*. Ivimey says that "the principles of this admirable little work were those of modern Calvinism in opposition to the system of high or hyper-Calvinism which had so generally prevailed in our churches".<sup>2</sup> So he attributes the commencement of the new era to a theological reformulation of Calvinist doctrines.

In an article published in the *Baptist Quarterly* of October 1973, "The Baptists and the Transformation of the Church 1780-1830" W. R. Ward mentions "the triumph of the moderate Calvinists over the hyper-Calvinists" but he denies that the transformation of the church was "mainly a theological one" and he refers to responses to social and organisational factors. His detailed study makes a valid emphasis yet he does accept the period I have suggested as one which saw a transformation of the church.

A more recent comment comes from Clyde Binfield in his studies in English Nonconformity, *So Down to Prayers*, for, referring to the influence of the evangelical movements of the eighteenth century, he writes "There had to be a revaluation of mission, a reassessment of organisation and a review of doctrine".<sup>3</sup>

I would accept those three elements as essential features of the new era but I would wish to place them in a different order and so to make a judgment nearer that of Ivimey's. I would suggest that a renewed theology led to a rediscovery of mission and the creation of organisations for the fulfilment of mission.

This judgment is implicit in a statement about the period I am discussing made by Michael Watts in his recently published book *The Dissenters*. He refers to the influence of the writings of Jonathan Edwards upon Ryland, Fuller and others and he writes "Thus did the writings of the Congregational pastor of Northampton, Mass., lead to religious revival among the Particular Baptists of Northamptonshire, England and set in train the dispersion of the principles of English Dissent to the four corners of the world".<sup>4</sup> This statement implies a theological origin for the spiritual renewing in the Northampton Association and it suggests the living connection between that period and our own, for the intervening years have seen the world-wide growth of the principles of English Dissent.

These references are sufficient to indicate that the period under discussion brought about the formulation of new patterns of Baptist church life which have continued throughout the nineteenth century and to our own time. This has caused many problems deriving from the relationship of these new patterns with the structures created during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, namely the independent local church and the associations; some of these problems remain unresolved. As a result of this relationship and of the growth of numerous denominational organisations since 1825 the new patterns have become much more complex, yet these developments have occurred within the basic structures. Many of us as a matter of fact have been nurtured spiritually in the forms of church life fashioned in that new era of which Ivimey speaks. But are we coming to the end of that era? The patterns are being subject to the heavy pressures exerted by radical changes. Are we moving into a different era in which different patterns will be both needed and forced upon us?

Then the questions which we might ask are these: what were the factors present at the end of the eighteenth century producing the

structures for the new era? From what sources did those structures emerge? In all this, is there anything of relevance for our era of radical change?

In his account of the life and death of Andrew Fuller published in 1816 John Ryland devotes a first brief chapter to a short account of the state of Baptist churches. He mentions the five points of Calvinistic doctrine accepted by the Particular Baptists<sup>5</sup> and then describes the controversy which broke out during the eighteenth century concerning what was called the Modern Question, i.e., "whether it be the duty of all men to whom the Gospel is published to repent and believe the gospel."<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis here falls on the word "duty". The concept that all men have a duty to repent and believe is an important one carrying significant implications. Ryland refers to ministers who rejected the concept; they included Brine and Gill who influenced other ministers so that "the preachers were too much restrained from imitating our Lord and his apostles in calling on sinners to repent and believe the gospel".<sup>7</sup> In this situation, writes Ryland, several ministers began "independently of each other to examine this question for themselves"<sup>8</sup> and clearly he was one of those ministers. But in particular he says "God was preparing Fuller to be an instrument of checking the progress of False Calvinism and bringing back many from the very borders of Antinomianism."<sup>9</sup>

In his diary for 21st October 1784 Fuller writes: "I feel some pain at the thought of being about to publish on the obligations of men to believe in Christ, fearing I shall hereby expose myself to a good deal of abuse, which is disagreeable to the flesh".<sup>10</sup> And the next day he writes: "Walked to Northampton: some prayers that God would bless that about which I am going, namely the printing of my manuscript on the duty of sinners to believe in Christ".<sup>11</sup> The words "obligation" and "duty" characterise his Gospel worthy of all acceptance. The second part of his book offers "arguments to prove that faith in Christ is the duty of all men who hear or have the opportunity to hear the Gospel".<sup>12</sup> One of his arguments is that in the New Testament faith is "constantly held up as the duty of all to whom the gospel is preached", consequently he can assert that unbelievers fail to fulfil an obligation because "they ought to have allowed Christ the place which he so justly claimed and to have chosen him whom the Lord had chosen".<sup>13</sup> He continues: "on no other ground could the Scripture censure them as it does; and on no other principle could they be characterised as disobedient: for all disobedience consists in a breach of duty".<sup>14</sup>

When Carey wrote about the implications of this new theological emphasis he faithfully reproduces Fuller's characteristic words in his "Enquiry into the obligations of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen". The last section of his book is then headed: "An enquiry into the duty of Christians in general and what means ought to be used in order to promote this work".

If Fuller the powerful apologist and controversialist and Carey the practical visionary both understood Christian faith and life in terms of obligation and duty it was John Ryland whose many sermons present perhaps the most systematic and integrated statement of this total theological position.

There is always danger in attempting to summarise a comprehensive theological system in a few brief points yet, for the sake of clarity in this discussion I venture to suggest that the evangelical Calvinism advocated by Ryland, Fuller and others rested on four basic emphases.

(i) The absolute sovereignty of God over all His creation including mankind. It is easy to make such a doctrine rigid, impersonal and harsh and that charge could be brought against the hyper-Calvinists, but Ryland offers a different interpretation in a sermon preached to the Western Association in 1811 on "the harmony of the divine perfections in the work of redemption". It is a profound reflection on the nature of God, facing particularly the question: how can mercy and truth be reconciled in God's relation with man? The truth of God's absolute and sovereign will and the forgiveness inherent in God's mercy, those apparent irreconcilable opposites, are shown to be paradoxes within the divine nature. And Ryland lets the emphasis fall on the merciful nature of the sovereign will.

(ii) The initiative of divine grace in man's salvation revealed and operative in Christ to whom all men are capable of responding by faith and ought to respond. Emphasis was constantly laid on "the efficacy of divine grace", which Ryland explained and defended at the Western Association in 1816. As early as 1781 he was preaching about "Christ manifested and Satan frustrated", an assertion of the triumphant work of God in Christ, and at the funeral of Robert Hall senior he proclaimed a finished salvation seeing the death of Christ as the completion of God's saving work. But always this emphasis on the initiative of God's grace in Christ led to appeals for response and statements about the way in which all men could respond and ought to respond when they hear the gospel. The divine initiative in showing mercy to sinful man places upon all the obligation to receive the mercy.

(iii) The responsibility of every believer to order his whole life according to the will of God made known by the Spirit through the scripture. At the Association meetings in Leicester in 1787 Ryland argued that "the law is not against the promises of God", showing that the believer for whom the gracious promises of God are being fulfilled must still accept the moral law. Again on a visit to College Lane in 1819 he emphasizes "the practical influence of evangelical religion". Dependence on efficacious grace does not make anti-nomianism acceptable; quite the contrary. It means obedience to "the two primary commandments"; it means sanctification by the Spirit.

(iv) The obligation of all believers to bring the gospel to all men everywhere. In 1794 Ryland spoke to the Western Association about "the certain increase of the glory and kingdom of Christ", affirming that Christ will increase as his church grows and urging the Association

to pursue the work of Christ especially through the mission. Nearly twenty years later he spoke to the same Association about "the necessity of the trumpets giving a certain sound". He summarises the doctrines of sin, of atonement and of the divinity of Christ as the basis for a powerful plea about offering the gospel to all and he includes a special plea to parents to teach their children the faith and to the churches to send more missionaries.

Here then is a coherent form of Calvinism strongly grounded in a firm conviction about the nature of God, affirming the primacy of His grace in Christ and finding both strength and purpose through the personal responsibility brought by the obligation to respond in faith, to order life by a moral law and to bring the gospel to all mankind.

Two further points should be made about this theological system. First it should be noted that clarity and coherence do not in themselves make a theology living and effective. Theologies possessing these characteristics can be forgotten, entombed in the covers of unread books. The evangelical Calvinism we are speaking about was marked not only by clarity and coherence but also by its intimate association with living experience.

The old Puritan emphasis upon the necessity of an individual and personal experience of the grace of God in Christ was often submerged by the theological controversies of the eighteenth century yet was not wholly lost. Then the happenings on both sides of the Atlantic as a result of the ministries of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and the Wesleys renewed the emphasis on the personal experience of grace. Writing about this period in his book *The Dissenters* Michael Watts states: "The Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism of the Methodists were not, as in the case of the Dissenters, intellectual creeds inherited from their forefathers, they were beliefs forged in the fires of deep spiritual tension and experience".<sup>15</sup> The group of Midland Baptists grew up in this atmosphere and it is noticeable that all of them record spiritual struggles and changes as profound and moving in their way as those recorded by Bunyan in his 'Grace Abounding' or John Wesley in his diary.<sup>16</sup>

It was this living, personal experience which required a theological explication different from that offered by the form of Calvinism which they had known in their youth. So their evangelical Calvinism derived from the realities and necessities of their personal experience. This experience brought to life the word of Scripture, then the authority of Scripture confirmed the authenticity of the experience. On this foundation rose the new theological structure. From these roots grew a living tree.

Second, it should be noted that this evangelical Calvinism was advocated by a group of people remarkable for their unwavering and complete devotion to the cause of Christ, for their mental and personal gifts and for their warm and unflinching trust in one another. All these elements contributed to the spread of their doctrine and its implications but I would emphasize with a few brief illustrations their

affectionate trust in one another. I find it both moving and significant.

In his funeral sermon for Andrew Fuller, Ryland recalls the friendships he has enjoyed mentioning "the venerable Newton and the first Robert Hall, counsellors of my youth" as well as "the affectionate Pearce" with whom he had "an ardent friendship".<sup>17</sup> In his life of Fuller he says "I always considered Fuller and Brother Sutcliff and myself as more closely united to each other than either of us were to anyone else"<sup>18</sup> and he calls himself Fuller's "oldest and most intimate friend".<sup>19</sup> Although they were separated for twenty years, Fuller in Kettering and Ryland in Bristol, "yet a constant correspondence was all along maintained; and to me at least it seemed a tedious interval if more than a fortnight elapsed without my receiving a letter from him".<sup>20</sup> Ryland preserved these letters as he did those from other friends so that when he wrote the life of Fuller in 1816 he had before him more than 330 letters from his friend.<sup>21</sup> Another friend from whom Ryland was separated for many years was William Carey; yet a regular correspondence was maintained between them and as late as 1821 Carey wrote to Ryland "My dear Brother I have always loved you since I knew you and my love I am sure continues undiminished."<sup>22</sup> In 1826 when he heard of Ryland's death Carey wrote "Ever since I heard of the death of my very dear friend, certainly the dearest to me of any man in the world, England has appeared a blank. He, in conjunction with my dear brethren Fuller, Sutcliff and Mr. Hall, sen. was the guide of my unexperienced youth, my faithful counsellor, and my staunch friend; our esteem for each other was reciprocal. He was scarcely ever forgotten in my prayers; and I believe I was scarcely ever forgotten in his."<sup>23</sup>

Brief glimpses of affection and trust, unailing through the years, between a group of men as they laboured in different spheres to fulfil the obligations placed upon them by their salvation wrought by the divine grace in Christ.

What can we say about the results which followed from this formulation and advocacy of evangelical Calvinism? We can discern these results in four areas of Baptist church life throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(i) Evangelical Calvinism provided a balanced and coherent theological system firmly rooted in scripture. It enabled many Baptists to avoid the theological extremes which marked much of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries. It created a theological climate which was increasingly congenial to the majority of Baptists so that differing emphases and outlooks could live together in its atmosphere. As the nineteenth century proceeded it thus constituted a means of cohesion among Baptists; it was an important force within a rapidly expanding denomination which tended to stress individualism and freedom of action. The coming together of Baptist groups, especially the amalgamation of Particular and General Baptists later in the nineteenth century was due to many influences but by no means the least effective among them was this theological formulation.

(ii) Evangelical Calvinism created a sense of obligation for universal evangelism and stimulated the impetus to fulfil this obligation. This result is so familiar to us that we can overlook its extraordinary happening and startling significance for Baptist church life. The B.M.S. was a direct result of evangelical Calvinism constituting one of the most powerful structures of Baptist church life from that day to the present. The B.U. was another direct result for its main object was the strengthening of the churches so that together they might pursue Christ's work in Britain more effectively and give support to the mission abroad. The formation of these two bodies and the development of their work has brought into being perhaps the majority of the structures of Baptist life.

(iii) Evangelical Calvinism offered a powerful theological justification of the ministry of the Word as a dominant feature of Christian worship and of the verbal and written communication of the gospel as a means of evangelism. But this implied both an emphasis upon the need of preparation for the work of ministry and a concept of the type of preparation needed.

No one doubted that a personal response to the grace of God in Christ and an obedience to the Holy Spirit's guiding and equipping were essentials for those called to ministry, but already in Bristol where the theological position of the Midland group had always been advocated it was being argued that the proper training of one who possessed the essential spiritual qualifications would make him a better minister. This position was stated clearly in the document of 1770 which led to the enlargement of the work in Bristol by the formation of the Bristol Education Society.

The same theological emphasis then led in the early years of the nineteenth century to the founding of three more colleges, at Rawdon in 1804, at Abergavenny in 1807, and at Stepney in 1810. A theology which stressed the obligation of the communication of the gospel had much to do with the establishment and development of these important structures of Baptist church life.

(iv) Evangelical Calvinism became a bond linking together evangelicals in different denominations and enabling them to share in many religious and social enterprises. Ryland enjoyed a warm friendship with the evangelical Anglican John Newton and with Thomas Scott the biblical commentator and he was held in esteem by members of the Clapham group like Henry Thornton and William Wilberforce. Andrew Gifford, minister of Eagle Street maintained a close association with George Whitefield and was present at the opening of his Tabernacle in Tottenham Court Road. Charles Simeon, a leader of the evangelicals in the Church of England preached so powerful a sermon on the work of William Carey that Henry Martyn felt called to missionary service and Carey was the first to welcome him in India.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from such personal contacts there were joint enterprises such as the formation of the Bible Society, the struggle against slavery, movements for the abolition of social evils, societies of all kinds as



well as evangelistic missions and in all these evangelicals of different denominations constantly shared. Thus Baptists were able to move out of the isolated position into which so often they tended to find themselves during much of the eighteenth century; they moved fully into that stream of evangelical Christianity which was so powerful throughout the nineteenth century.

I trust that sufficient evidence has been suggested to support the argument that the main structures of Baptist church life which we have inherited derived from and were formed by the influences of evangelical Calvinism. Before we carry the argument to its conclusion we do well to remember that though this form of Calvinism was most powerfully advocated by that remarkable group of men we have referred to, the thoughts and labours of others were contributory streams. I give but one illustration to serve this reminder and you will understand my motives in referring to Bristol College which is celebrating the 300th anniversary of its foundation and in indicating briefly the significance of this College in the maintenance and spread of evangelical Calvinism.

It could well be maintained that the type of Calvinism we are discussing characterised much of the Baptist movement in the west of England generally and in Bristol particularly during the seventeenth century and afterwards. The work of Fuller, Ryland and others at the end of the eighteenth century is important not because they initiated the evangelical form of Calvinism but because they formulated more precisely and perceived the implications more clearly of doctrines which had been held by some ministers and churches before them.

In seventeenth century Bristol two strong Baptist churches were formed. Broadmead of which Edward Terrill was an elder was Calvinistic in doctrine but always held open communion and only gradually accepted fully believers baptism as a prerequisite of membership.<sup>25</sup> The Pithay church was always a Particular Baptist church and was led by Andrew Gifford, senior, from 1661-1721. Ivimey said that "he might be considered the Apostle of the West as he was the founder of most of the churches in Somersetshire and Gloucestershire."<sup>26</sup> His co-pastor William Bazley said in his funeral sermon that Gifford "desired to know nothing among his hearers but Jesus Christ and him crucified", and at the close of his sermon "he would offer Christ to sinners and invite them to embrace him as offered in the most affectionate and pathetic manner".<sup>27</sup> With this theological emphasis was combined in both churches a respect for learning as an aid in the communication of the gospel. This is seen in a number of the Broadmead ministers, in the attitude of Edward Terrill and in the action of the Giffords in sending the younger Andrew to Jones Academy in Tewkesbury.

Bristol College was born in this atmosphere and was intended to be a centre from which this understanding of the faith might spread. This aim was achieved after 1720 when Bernard Foskett began his 38 years as leader of the institution. It was said of him that "his religious

principles which were those commonly called Calvinistical he ever maintained with a steady Christian zeal. While he strongly asserted the honours of free grace, he earnestly contended for the necessity of good works, preaching duty as well as privilege. . . .<sup>28</sup> He developed a comprehensive curriculum and one writer says that he "established the reputation of the Bristol Academy in the eyes of Baptists as far afield as London and Wales".<sup>29</sup> In later years the hyper-Calvinist John Collett Ryland seems to have reacted against his tutors in Bristol who included Foskett and this might be testimony to the wider outlook which Foskett held.

More important than these origins of Bristol College is the fact that it has provided continuity through many generations for this theological emphasis, a continuity which has been maintained from 1720 when Foskett began his work until the present, some 250 years.

The type of Calvinism which was the theological foundation of College life during the second half of the eighteenth century is illustrated in the attitude of Hugh and Caleb Evans in the formation of the Bristol Education Society in 1770. The Society was formed "to the end that dissenting congregations, especially of the Baptist denomination, in any part of the British dominion may, if it please God to succeed our endeavours, be more effectually supplied with a succession of able and evangelical ministers".<sup>30</sup> Notice the breadth of outlook! To serve any dissenting congregation! Anywhere in the British dominion! With able as well as evangelical ministers! An introduction to the plan for the Society affirms strongly "the importance of a liberal education more especially to candidates for the Christian ministry".<sup>31</sup>

Or consider the "catalogue of a few useful books for a young minister" drawn up by Caleb Evans in 1773 "and given to one of his much loved pupils then leaving the Academy".<sup>32</sup> Those are the words of John Rippon who records the catalogue. Among the books on doctrine pre-eminence is given to John Owen's works, "highly valuable for sound learning and genuine devotion", and to Jonathan Edwards "the most rational, scriptural divine and the liveliest Christian the world was ever blessed with". Gill and Brine are mentioned as writers "I greatly reverence and esteem". Doddridge is mentioned in several parts of the catalogue, so is Watts. The sermons of Dr. Samuel Stennett who had baptized Evans at Little Wild Street are recommended "as the best, upon the whole, in my opinion, in the English language". The catalogue is clearly that of a very open minded Calvinist.

Then from 1793 to 1825, when John Ryland led the College the stream of evangelical Calvinism which had arisen in the Midlands mingled with the stream which had been flowing so long in Bristol and its area. Now, the vision of a succession of able and evangelical ministers is enlarged; the ministry must also be evangelistic and missionary. The basic Calvinism of the college is both more clearly formulated and more fully related to its universal obligations.

If the evangelistic and missionary aspects of the faith predominated during the rest of the nineteenth century the work of F. W. Gotch as a Hebrew scholar and a member of the Old Testament revision committee is a reminder that the element of learning was by no means forgotten. And the strength of the Calvinistic outlook is illustrated by the warm friendship between Culross and Spurgeon so that during the troubled times of the Downgrade Controversy Spurgeon wrote some moving letters to his friend. In a letter dated 9th January 1883 Spurgeon wrote: "How I wish you could look in upon me for an hour a day for the next twenty years" and at the end of his letter he said ". . . I am dreadfully human and want company". In 1887 when Culross was President of the Union Spurgeon wrote on 5th December from Mentone ". . . I believe you and I are of one heart and soul. I have always rejoiced to learn of you. In this matter I do not feel in the least divided from you by the fact that you are in a certain society and I am not. Yours in the one Body, C. H. Spurgeon"<sup>33</sup>

This continuity of emphasis has continued in the twentieth century for early in the struggles of the second World War Arthur Dakin published his book on Calvinism, perhaps the only direct outline and exposition of John Calvin's theology produced by a Baptist author. But characteristically the book is not simply an account of the theology. Dakin sees clearly that the problems it raises "are living issues in the world today". Is there idealism in the suggestion that it represents a challenge to us "as once again we face the urgent task of creating a truly Christian civilisation in which the glory of God and the good of man may be achieved?"<sup>34</sup> If so, it is the active idealism of evangelical Calvinism!

Thus through many generations the college maintained this emphasis in the life of the denomination and by the nature of its work it spread this emphasis in many parts of the Baptist fellowship. I would not be so foolish as to claim that all students maintain the emphasis of the institution which gave them the privilege of being students but the majority of students either by conscious acceptance or unconscious reaction do to a certain degree reflect that special emphasis.

During the years Bristol students have ministered in all parts of Britain, in all the fields of B.M.S. work and in many other parts of the world. Some have become tutors in colleges, some denominational leaders, many pastors of local churches. All these in varying ways have been shaping the life of the denomination.

So I trace a powerful stream of evangelical Calvinism which was flowing in the West of England in the seventeenth century and for which the college in Bristol has provided continuing and ever expanding channels through 250 years. Other streams too could be traced. These flowed in with that broad Midland stream and all this may truly be seen as the water of life for many Baptist activities and projects through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This brings me to the conclusion of my argument. I have sought to show that the evangelical Calvinism which was held among Baptists

in the seventeenth century and which has been maintained notably by Bristol College through all subsequent generations was powerfully strengthened by the Midland group in the late eighteenth century with an impressive emphasis upon its practical implications and obligations. This led them to the formation of many of the structures of Baptist church life which are familiar to us today.

But in our era of change will these structures remain? Ought they to remain in their present form? If we continue the process of change in which we are obviously involved or if radical change is brought to us by irresistible pressures of contemporary situations do we possess guidelines by which to direct change and form new structures? Does the historical situation we have been considering offer any illumination by which we may see a few guidelines? I suggest very briefly that it does. Therefore I offer the following considerations.

(i) Proper structures of church life derive from a coherent theology. In his sermon on the necessity of the trumpets giving a certain sound Ryland made a strong plea for more activities to communicate the gospel but the greater part of the sermon consists of an orderly exposition of his basic doctrines. He saw his theology as the foundation on which all organisational structures should be built. He was right!

Consequently I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new structures of church life as an effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present.

The formulation and propagation of such a theology is an urgent task. And it is a task for members of a younger generation as Fuller, Ryland and others were younger men. What is needed is not the writing of academic dissertations for the gaining of university degrees, though there are proper times and occasions for such exercises, but the theological explication of living experience in terms of the given gospel for the sake of Christian communication. In an era of varied theological argumentation, much of it unrelated to the human situation or to the deep needs of individuals and communities, this is a forbidding task requiring a combination of profound conviction, intellectual ability and knowledge, and prolonged, careful labours. But it could be the means of a living creative Word bringing new vitality and form to the denomination.

(ii) Our study of the past suggests some emphases for such a theological formulation.

It would be foolish to suggest that since the evangelical Calvinism we have described led to such powerful results we should simply repeat its ideas or use its terminology. Perhaps it would be equally foolish to ignore altogether its main emphases. We may not be able to sound all the notes of Ryland's trumpet but we might do well to orchestrate a few notes in order to give them a meaning ampler than Ryland and his friends realised and so to bring to our age the rich

music of the gospel by which Christians in all ages have been inspired.

Consider for example the basic emphasis on the sovereignty of God. An outmoded concept? Or one indispensable to a living faith? If the latter this belief then needs to be formulated in such a way as to give meaning to the whole life of man so that we are able to bring within the scope of God's purpose the searchings of all religions, the achievements of technology and the struggles of so many communities for the freedom which brings authentic living.

Or consider the emphasis on the divine activity of grace through Christ by the Spirit as the means of man's salvation. This is capable of a wider interpretation whereby the divine activity is discerned not simply in the restricted sphere of religious experience and activity but in all forms of human living, and salvation is understood not just in terms of the important relationship of the individual soul and God but in the larger terms of wholeness of life for both individual and society.

Or consider the emphasis on obligation and responsibility. Dislike of words now out of fashion cannot alter the realities of human experience. Whatever terms we may use, do we not need a fresh understanding of man's responsibility for his being and of his obligations towards his fellow men? And can we not interpret those responsibilities and obligations in such a way that they are clearly seen to be the necessary implication of man's true life and not as heavy restraints or forbidding negatives?

Reflections such as these brief comments suggest indicate that theological emphases made by a former generation can yield full and relevant meanings for today.

(iii) The development of new structures of church life as a means of communicating the gospel is a corporate activity.

The men of our historical period knew their evangelical Calvinism to be the intellectual expression of their profound experiences of God's grace in Christ; consequently they were able to accept one another with all the variety of personality, emphasis, function and method which were represented in their different ministries. They worked in trusting and open minded fellowship with one another and in Pauline manner they encouraged one another in the faith striving together in the gospel. As Carey wrote to Ryland, they had enjoyed sweet communion.

That is not our language, but the spiritual realities behind the words belong to all generations so that those realities could be as powerful and effective in our day as in a previous age.

A fresh theological formulation of profound spiritual experience bringing people together in a mutually responsive and trusting fellowship provided the means whereby the Spirit of God brought into being new structures of church life for communicating the gospel. Is the Spirit seeking such means today?

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> J. Ivimey, *History of the Baptists*, Vol. IV, p. 41.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Clyde Binfield, *So Down to Prayers*, p. 24.
- <sup>4</sup> M. Watts, *The Dissenters from the Reformation to the French Revolution*, p. 461.
- <sup>5</sup> John Ryland, *The Work of Faith, the labour of love and the patience of hope illustrated in the life and death of Andrew Fuller* (1816), p. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller* (1831), Vol. II, p. 22.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 25.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 33.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 439.
- <sup>16</sup> An account of John Ryland's spiritual experience contained in a letter which he wrote to a friend in 1770 was edited by H. Wheeler Robinson and printed in the *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (Jan. 1928), pp. 17-26. In Bristol College library a book in Ryland's handwriting contains the beginning of an autobiography; this though very incomplete also records his spiritual experience as a young man.
- <sup>17</sup> John Ryland, *A sermon preached at Kettering in Northamptonshire at the funeral of the Rev. Andrew Fuller May 15, 1815* (1815), p. 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Ryland, *Life and death of Fuller*, p. vii.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.
- <sup>22</sup> Letters from Carey to Ryland in the possession of College Street Baptist Church, Northampton.
- <sup>23</sup> From a Carey letter, dated Serampore, Oct. 28, 1826, printed by J. E. Ryland at the end of his memoir on Ryland.
- <sup>24</sup> "It was after a powerful sermon by Simeon about the life and work of William Carey that Henry Martyn first began to consider the possibility of himself serving as a missionary". "Henry Martyn, having left England in August 1805 was welcomed to Calcutta in May of the following year by none other than the great William Carey whose life story had been the first thing that turned his thoughts to India". Hugh Evan Hopkin, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge*, p. 147.
- <sup>25</sup> This is more fully stated with factual evidence by R. Hayden in *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol* (1974), pp. 42ff.
- <sup>26</sup> Ivimey, Vol. II, p. 546.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 549.
- <sup>28</sup> S. A. Swaine, *Faithful Men or Memorials of Bristol College*, p. 37, where Swaine asserts that he is quoting the words of one who "was intimately associated" with Foskett.
- <sup>29</sup> J. W. Ashley Smith, *The Birth of Modern Education*, p. 211.
- <sup>30</sup> The foundation document of the Bristol Education Society is quoted in full by Swaine, pp. 72ff.
- <sup>31</sup> Swaine, p. 75.
- <sup>32</sup> J. Rippon, *The Baptist Register*, Vol. I, pp. 253-6.
- <sup>33</sup> These letters are in the possession of the Bristol Baptist College.
- <sup>34</sup> A. Dakin, *Calvinism*, p. 6.