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CHURCHES IN CONTEXT: A SCOTTISH STORY

Dr Bebbington and his team are to be congratulated on *The Baptists of Scotland: A History* [The Baptist Union of Scotland, 1988, 346 pp.+ xi]. The design is simple: four chronological chapters followed by fourteen regional studies, each with a map locating both continuing and extinct churches. This allows consideration of both the changing temporal and contrasting regional context to the church's mission, highlighting the inter-relatedness of gospel and culture, most strikingly seen in sections on the Highlands and Islands and missionary endeavour in Gaelic. Here the cultural context is conspicuously different - but has any church really succeeded in developing a compelling Christian apologetic in a context of working class culture?

The differences between Baptist life in Scotland and south of the border are striking. Lack of continuity with Puritan origins is immediately obvious: Cromwell's armies brought Baptist beliefs into Scotland and small congregations were established, but a dominant Presbyterianism soon squeezed them out as alien intrusions. Baptists formed a small and relatively late part of a dissenting constituency which even before the Disruption was predominantly Presbyterian, especially in the context of historic splits with both Catholics and Episcopalians. Further, the nature of nonconformity is governed by the character of the Establishment from which it dissents, and the nature of English and Scottish establishments was markedly different. The story is of a Calvinist denomination that had its theology and churchmanship questioned by

a warmer revivalist Evangelicalism through the Morisonian revisionism of the 1840s, more than half a century after itinerancy, foreign missions and Fullerism had modified the hyperism of Brine and Gill in England. General Baptists were virtually unknown in John Knox's Scotland. Most Scottish Baptist churches have retained closed membership, with a diaconate normally elected for life or until retirement.

In the nineteenth century there were three strands to the story. The Scotch Baptist tradition with its Glasite origins may have been brittle in polity and practice but embraced a plurality of eldership only latterly discovered or rediscovered in the south; ironically this has only survived in Scotch Baptist churches of the diaspora of North Wales and North West England. Secondly, there were the 'English Baptists', or rather those like Christopher Anderson who created avenues of communication with the south and developed a similar polity and outlook. They were in part the outcome of English Baptist ministerial candidates resorting to Scottish universities, and in part the fruit of Andrew Fuller's journeys north of the border on behalf of the Serampore Mission. Thirdly, the Haldanites brought into the Baptist movement strength and leadership, so often in these pages identified as fundamental to success, out of an earlier secession from the Established Church. These traditions came together in 1827 to form the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland, which supported the arduous and devoted labours of generations of principally Highland and Island home missionaries, and brought a measure of unity to Scottish Baptists prior to the founding of the Scottish Union in 1869. Such unity was critical to extension while infant church plantings depended on the support of the wider fellowship.

The differences are important, but many themes are common north and south of the border: Baptist priority upon evangelism, the temperance imperative, enthusiasm for foreign missions. Increasingly the social conscience seeks expression in denominational life. A better educated constituency requires a better trained ministry, and so, not without some theological difficulties, theological colleges come into being. The rise and decline of great industries collected and dispersed urban populations, creating opportunity or crisis for many a local church: the critical factor was the ability to respond to change decisively. By contrast, the migration first from Highland congregations to the cities, the Lowlands and the dominions, and later from Scotland's depressed industries after the First World War to the southern kingdom and dominions, was on a scale that was quite unique.

Today the Scottish churches want more consistently to describe themselves as Conservative Evangelical. Many are suspicious, or at least unenthusiastic, about organised ecumenism, because of the involvement of non-evangelical churches, but more particularly because of an ongoing hostility to Roman Catholicism, especially on the west side of the country with its Ulster connections. Although the Scottish Union joined the W.C.C. by a single vote in 1948, it withdrew seven years later, whilst retaining membership of British and Scottish Councils of Churches. The record includes accounts of distinguished pastoral ministry by women in the past. Neither its independence of international ecumenical commitments, nor its own clearly evangelical stance have spared the Scottish Union from congregational secession, with the withdrawal of Charlotte Chapel being particularly painful (though two of the heritage-makers of the present volume are senior officers of that fellowship, which also funded the book's excellent maps). The impact of Brethrenism had similar effects both north and south of the border, as also the impact of the charismatic movement. Of course, the Scottish churches are not monochrome: their internal life of prayer and witness is as properly different as the external appearances of their chapel architecture, ranging as it does from the magnificence of the Coats Memorial Church in Paisley to barn-like village chapels or downtown missions. But it is not buildings, however essential, or institutions, be they never so correctly organised, or theological treatises, however sound, but people - prayerful, loving and obedient, people with a vision and a commitment - that make mission.