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# THE REVEREND SECRETARY AUBREY

## PART I

### I Introduction

When M. E. Aubrey entered into his secretaryship of the Baptist Union on Tuesday morning, 28 April 1925, a young Regent's student sat in the gallery at Bloomsbury observing the proceedings. Many fine words were spoken with assurances of support, loyalty and, as the fluent pen of J. C. Carlile commented in the *Baptist Times*, 'An old order was passing, grand but now closed. A new era was coming to birth'.<sup>1</sup> The young student in the gallery, whose name was Ernest Payne, wondered whether things would turn out for M. E. Aubrey quite like that!

Thirty-two years later it fell to that same Ernest Payne to write the *Baptist Union Handbook* memoir of Melbourn Evans Aubrey,<sup>2</sup> into whose secretarial office he had succeeded five years earlier. Payne listed Aubrey's achievements in office, taking as examples, the raising of £300,000 for the Ministers' Superannuation Fund, the Baptist Forward Movement Fund of £1,000,000 for church extension, his part in the Free Church Councils, and concluded that in retirement Aubrey could look back with satisfaction on the consolidation and the expansion of the work of the Union during a period of unusual difficulty.

The more I have worked through the details of the period of Aubrey's secretaryship, particularly between the two wars, the greater has grown my sympathy for him. You may recall that in 'The Young Mr Aubrey' I quoted a letter to him from C. H. Dodd, written in the autumn of 1912, which opens with the prophetic words, 'You have a genius for getting into perplexing crossways'.<sup>3</sup> These words were to prove only too true in the years from 1925 to 1939. Aubrey's first Assembly in Leeds in 1926 coincided with the General Strike. There followed years of economic depression and social unrest. Unemployment was rife and poverty common. In the early 1930s Hitler began his rise to power and the nations moved inexorably towards a second World War. Religion was in decline and Baptists were not exempt. Denominationally Aubrey was surrounded by highly competent and formidable Baptist leaders, lay and ministerial. After the Shakespeare years they were determined to allow no repeat of his highly individualistic leadership. Not only was Aubrey aware of the pressure upon himself, he was only too well aware that denominational unity was familiarly fragile. His dilemma was how to be true to his own convictions whilst holding the ring between the strongly held and often irreconcilable views of his fellow Baptist leaders. A further complication was that he could never be quite sure who would align himself with whom and when. Peter Aubrey's assessment is that his father's main pre-occupation all too often was to become a *compositeur amiable*, a gracious peacemaker.

This is in no way to suggest that Aubrey did not enjoy the years in office - at least some of the time. Having been elected to the Secretaryship - whether second or third choice - he was determined to serve in leadership. His problem was when to lead on his own from the front and when to lead from the middle, restraining pacemakers and dragging slow coaches along, and when to lead from the rear, pushing the diverse and often stubborn denomination into a sensible future. This makes it often difficult to discern exactly what Aubrey himself thought about things.

That he survived for so long was due not only to his sense of calling and his total denominational loyalty, but also to the opportunities that came his way to become involved in affairs both clearly ecclesiastical and less evidently ecclesiastical beyond the denominational bounds. A further part of his personal survival kit was his ability to retreat, to reflect, to recuperate, and then to return to the fray. Peter describes his father as, in many ways, a solitary person. No doubt the experts would attribute this to the exodus to the United States of his parents and his brothers and

sisters, leaving him alone in this country. On Saturdays he would go for long walks around Barnet and Hadley Woods, sometimes on his own, sometimes with Peter, tackling things in his own mind, essentially silent and reflective. After many annual assemblies he went on his own to France, to Juan les Pains, to relax and reflect. He recognized the essential nature of a survival kit. Perhaps it is not without some significance that Aubrey is the only General Secretary thus far this century who has escaped serious illness during the exacting years of office.

It is not my intention to catalogue Aubrey's activities; this has been done already in summary form in Ernest Payne's *The Baptist Union*.<sup>4</sup> Rather do I want to take four issues during the inter-war years and speak of them in detail. I choose them for several reasons. First, because of their own intrinsic interest and relevance to the Aubrey story; secondly, because in each of them I have come across primary material which, so far as I know, has not been detailed before; thirdly, because each of them has some ongoing relevance to the denominational life of today. The four issues are: the controversy over T. R. Glover's booklet on *Fundamentals* in 1932; the Call to Action issued by Lloyd George in 1935; the 1938 scheme for joint headquarters in Russell Square, and the Union's stance towards and Aubrey's involvement in the developing ecumenical movement.

## II Fundamentals

Keith Clements, in his fascinating *Lovers of Discord*, has dealt in some detail with the controversy over Glover's booklet on *Fundamentals*.<sup>5</sup> I want simply to illustrate Aubrey's own part in the affair. In brief, the controversy developed during preparations for the 1932 Discipleship Campaign, which was an attempt 'to call church members back to a fuller realization of the implications of discipleship and especially to the task of making disciples of others'.<sup>6</sup> T. R. Glover was invited to produce a study pamphlet with the title *Fundamentals*. Aubrey, only too well aware of Glover's brilliance and of his idiosyncracies, sent the draft pamphlet in July 1931 to some theologians for comment. C. E. Raven was amongst those circulated. Raven raised two questions in particular. While Glover had started his outline of the Fundamentals with man's sin, Raven thought it ought to start with 'Our Father', but he acknowledged to Aubrey, 'that if the readers are to be won from the old scheme of salvation, it may be as well to do as Glover has done and take its sequence'.<sup>7</sup> Aubrey agreed, writing to Glover to say that starting at the wrong end for the trained theologian may be the right end for the readers'.<sup>8</sup> More seriously, Raven suggested that it is futile to think you can have a doctrine of the Atonement while your Christology is 'in the air'.<sup>9</sup> But the trouble which was to erupt had to do primarily with neither the starting point of *Fundamentals*, nor with the Christological issue, but rather with the question of the substitutionary view of the Atonement. Aubrey's letters and Glover's diaries enable us to follow the subsequent events somewhat at first hand.

The Publications Committee Minutes of 9 October 1931 state that Dr T. R. Glover's outlines for group study, first series, *Fundamentals*, was ready for issue.<sup>10</sup> On 16 November it was reported that the outline had been widely circulated and by 9 February 1932 it was recorded that 5,000 copies of Dr T. R. Glover's outline had been printed, of which 1800 had been distributed gratuitously to ministers, the total sale was 2,150 and the Baptist Union of Scotland had adopted it in connection with their evangelistic campaign.<sup>11</sup> The ministerial distribution had indeed taken place on 4 November 1931, with a covering letter from Aubrey inviting ministers to use it themselves and to help with the circulation for use in study groups in their churches. He went on to hope that 'it might lead ministers to preach on these great themes as the consideration of them stirs their own hearts'.<sup>12</sup> As David Bebbington

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points out in his stimulating article, 'Baptists and Fundamentalism in Inter War Britain',<sup>13</sup> one or two were stirred up in rather different ways from that which Aubrey and the committee had hoped. W. E. Dalling, as Bebbington says,<sup>14</sup> delightedly drew attention to the dismissal of the substitutionary doctrine of the Atonement in this subtle piece of modernist propaganda. Tydeman Chilvers of the Metropolitan Tabernacle indicated in the February *Sword and Trowel* that as it was an official publication of the Baptist Union it made clear what the doctrinal position of the Union was. The moderate Thomas Greenwood felt bound to join in. He wrote a long letter to the members of the BU Discipleship Campaign Committee.<sup>15</sup> His concern was that, as the pamphlet was written at the request of a Committee of the Council, issued by the BU Publications Department and distributed from Baptist Church House, it was an official act for which all the members must bear responsibility. He sees the pamphlet as an attack on the doctrine of the vicarious sacrifice. He writes, '*I am not commencing a controversy but am replying to an attack*'. It is a fascinating letter, which seeks to be both strongly worded and eirenic. Greenwood claims that he has defended the Union when writings of its leaders have been challenged, but defence is impossible when a Committee of the Council publishes what is not merely an insufficient exposition of the Atonement but an actual attack on the evangelical view. Greenwood concludes, 'Dr Glover has told me that he is not pleased with the book; if he should wish to withdraw it I respectfully ask you to give your consent, and if he does not move in the matter to act yourselves'.

Aubrey had to act on two fronts: publicly, in defence of the Union, personally in coping with the formidable T. R. Glover. Publicly, the Publications Department Committee decided to print on the flyleaf the typical disclaimer for corporate responsibility for views contained in the booklet. The *Baptist Times* replied to Tydeman Chilvers to a similar effect, that such publications carry only the authority of their authors. Glover himself reacted immediately to the effect that he would withdraw nothing. His diary records on 12 February, 'Wrote to Aubrey re T. Greenwood's demand that Discipleship Commission withdraw my Fundamentals - but I will withdraw nothing for such an attack but Commission can decide and then Council'.<sup>16</sup> The next day he records 'letter from Aubrey to effect that the BU Executive Committee had talked of my Fundamentals on Thursday but not favouring Greenwood. Aubrey has told Greenwood that he must stand for liberty of thought and judgement with 4 corners of our declaration of Principle. This greatly cheered me.' A more personal letter from Aubrey followed on 17 February (unless it be misdated, as I suspect, and is the letter TRG refers to in his diary on the 13th). It is worth quoting in some detail as it reveals the tensions of the writer and his desire to encourage T. R. Glover and himself.<sup>17</sup>

My dear Glover,

Don't worry and again don't worry. There is no need. You have plenty of friends on the Committee and on the Council. Let 'em fight the battle. No danger of booklet being withdrawn. I should resign if it were . . . I told Committee that withdrawal would mean that there is no room in Union for a man holding your views and speaking them, and they agreed . . . it would precipitate controversy - split denomination - a merry beginning for a Discipleship Campaign . . .

Sit tight. It's more dignified. The "strong silent man" is the best game just now. If I had my way I'd put you in hospital for two months to keep you quiet!!!

I'm in hot water too, lots of it. Keeps you from getting sticky!

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Hooray! It's a great life!  
Try to imagine me as a brazen wall!  
Ever yours, M.E.A.

Greenwood is a Christian, worth a dozen of lots of your modernists!

On 22 February Glover's diary notes, 'Lunch with MEA talking over TG's attack on me which is to come to Council but does not worry MEA. He likes TG but thinks he will have little support on Council.' On 1 March the diary says that 'R.C.G. [Griffin, Superintendent for the Eastern Area] came in and talked 1 hour re Greenwood's motion to withdraw my pamphlet - Griffin wobbles a bit.' The following day Glover records, 'Wrote to Charles Brown and Blomfield re next Monday [Council] and Greenwood . . . letter from Times Editor thanking me for the delightful article.' This latter is a reference to an article which Glover had written for *The Times* on 'The Free Churches these last 50 years' which spoke of the waning of Spurgeon's influence and his tradition. Remarkably, Glover had seemingly told no-one of this article which was already in proof, so that while the significant debate on the pamphlet, *Fundamentals*, took place in Council on Monday, 7 March, the article was ticking away in proof like a bomb which exploded into print later the same week on 11 March. It really was an extraordinary scenario. Was Glover just plain mischievous, or blind to consequences, or simply determined to hold his position? Did he think perhaps that *Baptist Times* readers were not readers of *The Times*?<sup>18</sup>

The Council on 7 March was a triumph for Aubrey's compromise politics. H. G. Wood describes it in some detail.<sup>19</sup> Greenwood moved his resolution for the pamphlet's withdrawal. Glover magnanimously offered to withdraw rather than hurt the feelings of his brethren. Council clearly was not for its withdrawal. There was a tactical adjournment. The chairman, the BU President, a layman, Alfred Ellis of Amersham (of Ellis & Fairbairn fame), consulted with Greenwood and Percy Evans, the Principal of Spurgeon's College. A statement was put together which reads:

The Committee of the Discipleship Campaign and Dr Glover learned with surprise and regret that the pamphlet had been understood by some as an attack on the views held by many who were in the Union; that nothing was farther from their thought; and that, if Mr Greenwood withdrew his motion, he would move from the Chair that another pamphlet, setting out other views of doctrine, should be issued, and that the pamphlet should be distributed as 'Fundamentals' had been.<sup>20</sup>

Greenwood withdrew his motion and Ellis moved the resolution incorporated in the statement. Glover seconded it, and made a remarkable speech which was Christocentric, claiming that all could unite in saying 'He loved me and gave Himself for me'. The result was relief all round. Ellis wrote to Glover, thanking him for his gracious speech. Aubrey wrote the following day, 8 March:

My dear Glover,

Your stock was never higher than it is today. *Laus Deo*.

You couldn't have done better. Both your silence and your speech told heavily.

(As you know I was never a bit afraid. I know our Council.)

Petty difficulties are always a nuisance. A big trouble is a big chance. This was.

I have always acted on the theory that it is best to walk straight up to this kind of difficulty, and this time I made up my mind it

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was no good to try any side-tracking. After what happened I intend to walk straight up to the next. God doesn't let us down when we do that. (I'm a bit tired but happy, if this letter reads a bit silly, it is more or less being a fool for Christ's sake. I was glad Mary was there).

My love to you, Ever, MEA<sup>21</sup>

On Friday, 11 March, *The Times* bomb exploded. Its impact was heightened by the sub-editor's heading which ran 'Defeat of Spurgeon'. It was Glover in his most brilliant journalistic style. Glover's diary for 11 March records: 'My article in *Times* with fresh headline of their invention'; on 12 March: 'received much acclaim for my article.' But not from M. E. Aubrey. Aubrey had written immediately to *The Times*, dissociating the Union from the article. Nor from Tydeman Chilvers who announced from the Metropolitan Tabernacle pulpit, the triumph of Spurgeon and the overthrow of Glover. Aubrey wrote on 13 March a long, vehement, pleading letter to Glover. He was so steamed up that he misdated it 15.3.23.<sup>22</sup>

My dear T.R.

For the love of Mike go slow for a bit!

If the present Secretary of the B.U. ever has his portrait painted for the Church House you ought to pay about half the cost!

My letter in the Times has already brought me messages, calls and congratulations and will do something to reduce a hurricane to a garden storm. The "Fundamentals" blow was a zephyr by comparison. But don't bother about me. It's my job anyhow, may even give me a lift up if we can pull the ship through on an even keel and won't do the Union very much harm in the long run.

It's you I'm most concerned about. You are being written down as a narrow-minded sort of Modernist prig who cannot appreciate even a great man if his point of view is different from your own. You must do something to rehabilitate yourself or the cause of theological progress with which you are identified is going to suffer rather heavily. The B.U. has made so much of you that people assume we approve of and are committed to your point of view and your statements.

If you are to keep caste [?] among a large section of our people you'll have to say some positive things that will carry the mind and heart of the Baptist people. Remember that men like Carlile, Hiley, Evans, Hancocks and the others of that great brigade - all of them stalwarts - don't like being told their training was "amateurish". Think of Luff, too, (Gange?) and all the others whom Spurgeon compelled to face hard places filled with an enthusiasm that has never died. Contrast the half warmed ineffective bunch that too many of our Colleges have been turning out in this last generation, with little moral or spiritual force and a lack of that passion for saving men that have sustained Spurgeon's men through long, long ministries - Wilson 54 years, Cuff a lifetime in Shoreditch, Carlile 30 odd years at Folkestone, Douglas Brown 25 years at Balham. It's a great story and the amateurs often beat the expert hands down.

I should recommend a close and sympathetic study of Spurgeon - I think you'd change your estimate. He was a giant, when all is said and done, and more like you than you think! . . .

But give us a rest for a bit. Percy Evans rang me up this morning. Your article plunged him in the depths - you make it hard for your friends, especially on that side. He said, "The worst of it is that that wasn't the real Glover." The big, generous, evangelical very effectively disguised himself. Please don't do it again - for your own sake and the Gospel's. I love you as much as ever. Yours, MEA

That the smouldering controversy was not re-ignited by the *Times* article was due to Aubrey's immediate letter, to the restraining influence probably of T. G. Greenwood and certainly of Percy Evans - and is strong supporting evidence for David Bebbington's view that the moderates were in control of the fundamentalist tradition between the two wars. In 1955 when Ernest Payne produced and circulated to a number of Baptist leaders for comment a fairly detailed description of the Down Grade Controversy, Aubrey replied at length in a letter dated 9 September 1955, which I recently came across.<sup>23</sup> It is an important letter in that Aubrey sets out at some length information which he gleaned in his early secretarial years from those who could, in 1926, still recall events at first hand. For our particular purpose he describes how the controversy's aftermath was still evident in Baptist life. 'For my first eight or nine years I was conscious of antagonism that still smouldered and I had to go carefully and even replied guardedly to an attack on C.H.S. by T. R. Glover in the *Times*. T.R.G. took it very well fortunately. I think he realised he had been a naughty boy (an accustomed role), but as J.C.C. told him bluntly (when they became fast friends toward the end of Glover's life), C.H.S. never did attack his father as T.R. imagined - and Richard Glover strove for peace. But a slight upon his father, real or imaginary, was for T.R. the unforgivable sin.'

### III Lloyd George's Call to Action

The *Call to Action*, a manifesto which was instigated by Lloyd George and signed by many leading Free Church men, saw the light of day on 12 June 1935, but it has a considerable pre-history. In a fascinating chapter entitled 'The Last Rally', Stephen Koss, in his book, *Nonconformists in Modern British Politics*, gives a detailed account of the whole process.<sup>24</sup> Although my purpose is to describe and discuss Aubrey's part in the matter - his attitude was significant and vehement opposition - it is necessary briefly to set the scene. Lloyd George was, of course, the leading Nonconformist political figure. He had led the Liberal Party to political success in earlier days, with the Free Churches virtually solid behind him. By 1935, when Lloyd George was over seventy, the Liberal Party was divided and declining and Liberal support within the Free Churches was neither so vocal nor so certain. The Free Churches were by then organised into two movements, the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches and the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches. In the crucial year of 1935 F. W. Norwood, who, although a Baptist, was minister of the City Temple, was President of the National Council, S. W. Hughes the Secretary and Wilson Black the Treasurer - a trio of Baptists. In the Federal Council Sidney Berry, the Secretary of the Congregational Union, was Moderator, Lewis Robertson, a Presbyterian, was Secretary and Treasurer, and Aubrey was Moderator Elect for 1936-38 (they served two years). When the National Council met in Sheffield in March 1935, Lloyd George drew attention to the need for speedy action on unemployment, and foreign affairs - in relationships with Germany, and potential peace-keeping. Hughes invited Lloyd George to meet with certain concerned Free Church leaders. On 7 December 1934 Lloyd George invited seven prominent Free Churchmen to an emergency meeting for consultation regarding necessary action by all religious forces to preserve peace. Baptists present were Hughes and Charles

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Brown. Unemployment also remained on the agenda. Lloyd George was at the same time active in attempts to contact the Macdonald Cabinet. There was, of course, a so-called National Government in office. He suggested cabinet reconstruction somewhat on the basis of his War Cabinet but he received little encouragement. On 17 January 1935 he produced his *New Deal* proposals in a speech in Bangor, which was noted and welcomed in the *Baptist Times* of that date and of the following Thursday. He disclaimed any attempt to launch a party campaign, but it was probably a bid for power. For the next few months Lloyd George was in touch with Ramsay Macdonald and Stanley Baldwin (then Lord President of the Council, but thought likely to succeed Macdonald before long). Lloyd George was invited to submit his proposal to a Cabinet Committee. He was calling for a scheme of national reconstruction relating to employment, foreign affairs and peace. Amongst the drafters of the plan was F. W. Norwood.

In 1935 Germany produced plans for re-arming and conscription and Norwood gave his Presidential address on 'The Free Churches and the Military State'. As the likelihood of a Cabinet reshuffle grew ever more imminent, so did political activity. Rumours abounded that, although Lloyd George was now seventy-two, he would return to office. Certainly Lloyd George was claiming to have the ear of the electors and to know their mood and opinions. But Lloyd George had a political enemy in the Cabinet: Neville Chamberlain, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Chamberlain had been appointed Director of National Service in 1917 by Lloyd George but was not able to succeed. A. J. P. Taylor comments that 'he fell into hopeless confusion'. Subsequently Lloyd George described him as 'not one of my successful selections' and personal animosity prevailed between the two from then on, Lloyd George calling Chamberlain at one time a 'pinhead'.<sup>25</sup> In 1935 the Cabinet was not prepared to lose Neville Chamberlain for the sake of Lloyd George, although there may well have been other, and possibly even better, reasons for his failure to gain office. When Lloyd George met the Cabinet Committee for the ninth time on 4 June, he recalls that 'he knew in their hearts they were going to knife him', and comments 'I, too, have a dagger in my sheath for them'.<sup>26</sup> The following day Lloyd George released a press statement that 'at the instigation of a number of well known Nonconformists he was planning a nationwide campaign to rouse public opinion on issues of peace and unemployment'. This campaign, the dagger in the sheath, was the Call to Action. He wrote in confidence to a number of public figures, seeking their support and suggesting a National Convention early in July which would in turn launch a movement to secure the return of particular parliamentary candidates, for an election was anticipated later in the year. He suggested that the initiative had come from leading ministers of religion, and social workers of all creeds and political parties. The object was to set in motion a movement which might alter the history of England and the destinies of the world at large. A manifesto was drawn up.

On 7 June Aubrey received a copy and a letter inviting him to sign.<sup>27</sup> S. W. Hughes also sent him an urgent note, seeking his decision by return. Aubrey wrote immediately and urgently on 7 June to Ernest Brown, MP, an influential National Liberal and a Baptist deacon at Bloomsbury.

My dear Brown,

I am asked to sign the enclosed. I do not much like it. You will see at the bottom the list of those who have already promised to sign, and it is being suggested that the absence of my name might cause remark and be resented by some of our people. I have to make up my mind by Tuesday morning whether I will sign.

I am bound to say it does not appear to me to be fair to the Government and that is why I hesitate, though I should be only too



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glad to strengthen the hands of the forces working for peace. I know it is an appalling time to worry you, but if you could drop me a line or two by Tuesday, when I shall be back here, to say what you think, you would greatly help me.

I am hoping for official confirmation tonight or tomorrow of the news in the papers yesterday and today.

Yours ever

That day, Friday, 7 June Ramsey Macdonald stepped down in favour of Baldwin. The official confirmation to which Aubrey refers is probably the Cabinet reshuffle which was to bring Ernest Brown - somewhat surprisingly, as some thought - into the Cabinet as Minister for Health. The manifesto was due to be published on 12 June. One suspects that before then Aubrey received a message from Ernest Brown, confirming his negative attitude. Aubrey was going away for the weekend to Brighton. He wrote to Hughes from Sussex, refusing to sign. When he got back to the office on Tuesday, 11 June, he sent telegrams to the more significant of the Free Churchmen whom he understood had signed (interestingly, the Call to Action is the one issue upon which I discover Aubrey retained virtually full papers). The recipients of the telegrams were Wilson Black, S. M. Berry, S. W. Hughes, F. W. Norwood and Scott Lidgett, a leading Methodist and Secretary of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches.

R. W. Black, Kensington, 8234. Believe call to action serious mistake Hope reconsideration still possible (signed) AUBREY

Berry, Memorial Cent, London. Believe call to action incredibly mean and unworthy document and harmful to Free Churches Affectionately protest Federal Council Moderator's signature Beg stop and reconsider (signed) AUBREY

Hughes, Central 6310. Convinced call to action serious mistake Beg reconsideration before publication Otherwise must resign Council (signed) AUBREY

Norwood, Convinced call to action big mistake Respectfully protest Free Church Council President's signature Beg reconsideration before publication (signed) AUBREY

Lidgett, Deeply concerned call to action Convinced serious mistake Beg reconsideration (signed) AUBREY

As can be seen these missives were brief and to the point, and all had stings in them. The same day, 11 June, he wrote to S. W. Hughes, setting out quite clearly and vehemently why he would have no part in the Call.

My dear Hughes,

I sent you a letter from Brighton saying that I could not sign the "Call to Action". The more I thought of it the more uneasy I became. It has been on my mind all the time. This morning I wired to you begging that it should be reconsidered.

I cannot sign it as Secretary of the Union because I know it would give offence to large numbers of our people, both those who appreciate the work of the National Government and those who, without any special party politics, think that the Church of Christ should not be dragged through the mud of party electioneering tactics.

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I cannot sign it personally because, as I have said to Dr Berry, I think it is an incredibly mean and unworthy document. It talks vaguely about the missed opportunities and lack of effort on the part of the National Government. I hold no brief for the National Government, but I think that Christian men should, if they are going to speak in that way, at any rate express appreciation of what the Government that is by implication condemned has done in other directions, the courage with which it has faced the Indian problem, the remarkable programme of building in its effort to clear the slums as we know them, the fact that it has virtually set this country on an even keel financially, and has so raised the prestige of our own country abroad that, whereas a few years ago in America and on the Continent we heard people speak of the day of the British Empire having passed, there is scarcely any land that does not now envy us the position we are taking in the world. No effort is made to do justice to the patience of the Government in dealing with foreign countries and in resisting so long pressure to increase armaments.

Such a document comes ill from leaders of the Free Churches, for I do not suppose any Anglican Bishop or Archbishop would degrade the dignity of his part of the Church of Christ by dragging it into such a position as that in which this document will leave us. It is sure to create dismay in the hearts of many Free Churchmen though of course it will be received in some quarters with loud applause . . .

I am sure that if this document is published it will lead to a great deal of trouble and may be the end of the influence of the Free Church Council. It bears on it the marks of the influence of party men with political axes to grind, and I would not have the Baptist Union associated with it for all you might offer me, nor would I have anything to do with it personally except to repudiate it.

If I may say so, it comes with singularly bad grace from the Free Church Council leaders. Only a few weeks ago you gave a warm welcome to Mr Baldwin, who, in a very difficult position, has sought to maintain the idealism of the House of Commons and is a man of peace if ever there was one. Now in the very first days of his Premiership, with an election looming just ahead, you begin to make difficulties for him. There cannot be any doubt that this document will be exploited to the full by his political opponents.

I cannot tell you how grieved I am that these steps have been taken, and I hope it is still not too late for you to draw back.

With kindest regards, Yours sincerely (signed) M. E. AUBREY

The following day, 12 June, he received a summons to an executive of the National Council on 21 June. He replied to Hughes in a letter that was terse and to the point.

Dear Hughes,

In view of my resignation from the Free Church Council in the event of the "Call to Action" being published and the fact that I am told it is now impossible to hold it up, perhaps there is no need to write and say that I cannot be at the luncheon on Friday, 21 June.

I shall deeply regret my severance from a body with which I have

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been happy to work for so many years but I feel it is useless our trying to go on if leaders of the Council take steps which in effect mean that the machinery of the Council is being used by party politicians. I hoped that that day was past, and in any case I have no interest in such methods of work.

With kindest regards, Yours sincerely (signed) M. E. AUBREY

The manifesto, *Call to Action*, was issued on 12 June, signed amongst others by the following Baptists, Wilson Black, Charles Brown, J. C. Carlile, S. W. Hughes, and F. W. Norwood, and it indicated that a Council would be held on 1 and 2 July at Westminster Central Hall to further the cause. Wilson Black was acting as Secretary. The Press on 13 July was full of it. The *News Chronicle* headed it 'Free Churches Call to the Nation'. The *Guardian* and *Herald* saw in it an attack on the Government by Lloyd George and gave it considerable approval. *The Times* was critical, but it merited a leader which concluded:

The appeal as a whole purports to be a call to union; but it is in essence a call to refuse any union under the present National Government. It resembles rather too closely the sort of manoeuvre by which a clever tactician might exploit the intelligible disappointment of honest idealists. It is suggestive, in fact, rather of politics than of Christianity.

The sub-editor had no doubt as to its intent and headed the news story 'An Election Manifesto. Mr Lloyd George's Appeal'. Controversy raged, particularly as to whether the Manifesto was non-political or whether it was really a rallying call to form a new party.

On 13 June Aubrey sent Ernest Brown a copy of his resignation letter from the National Council, and also wrote to the Editor of *The Times*, for information only and *not for publication*.

Dear Sir

re "Call to Action" signed by Mr Lloyd George, certain Free Church leaders, and others

This letter is for your information only and not for publication.

I am convinced that the above so-called manifesto will be viewed with concern and disapproval by most Free Churchmen of weight. Those who have signed are, for the most part, old personal friends of Mr Lloyd George, who, I believe, has charmed them into doing so without any realisation on their part of the purpose to which it will be put. It is already being used as a weapon to support Mr Lloyd George and to attack the Government (vide the *News Chronicle*, *Manchester Guardian*, and *Herald*), and this I am assured was not the intention of some of the signatories.

I am anxious that The Times should not assume, at any rate at this stage, that this document has a solid Nonconformist backing, for that seems to me to be emphatically not the case.

I myself was asked to sign but declined to do so. Unfortunately I was abroad at the time the whole scheme was hatched and was too late to do anything to prevent its publication after my return.

For your further information I enclose a copy of my letter to the Free Church Council, since that Council seems heavily involved, giving my reasons for objecting to the document. I have also intimated to the Secretary my wish to resign from the Council as

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a protest.

I feel strongly that an electioneering campaign involving Nonconformist leaders in the wake of party politicians cannot but be harmful at this time to the cause of religion in this country. I plead only that The Times should suspend judgment as to the attitude of Free Churchmen in this matter until it has been made more clear.

I am, Sir, Yours faithfully

Dawson replied by return:

My dear Sir,

I am very much obliged to you for your letter of yesterday. I clearly understand that it is not intended for publication (though I hope that you may some day think fit to give public expression to your views); but it is very valuable for guidance.

Yours very truly, (signed) GEOFFREY DAWSON

The following day Aubrey wrote also to J. A. Hutton, editor of the *British Weekly* and a signatory, and to Arthur Porritt, editor of the *Christian World* and also a signatory, to indicate the actions he had taken. Porritt replied personally, defending his action by saying that he also was a National Government man but that it needed prodding. He instanced two million unemployed in a divided nation, with the comfortable, prosperous South towards which industry was flowing and a derelict, embittered North; Neville Chamberlain's rigidity in refusing any capital expenditure for relieving unemployment; and Macdonald's awful reply to the South Wales Church deputation. It is interesting to discover *The Times* returning to the issue on 15 June with an extended leader which seems to incorporate some of Aubrey's points: 'The document as a whole can hardly represent the universal views either of leaders or of members of the Free Churches'. The leader writer re-iterates that 'there is more in it [the Call to Action] of political mischief than of Christianity'. Disclaimers had begun to appear: for example, S. M. Berry in the *Manchester Guardian* on 14 June, and in the same issue Norwood maintains the campaign's non-party stance. Hughes, who was going to America towards the end of June, wrote briefly to Aubrey also on 14 June. Aubrey was further stimulated to reply on 17 June:

My dear Hughes,

Thank you for your letter of the 14th instant. I am very glad to read in the Manchester Guardian Berry's disclaimer that any criticism was intended of the National Government, and I hope that before the conference in July there will be a great many other similar disclaimers, or that the Free Church Council will make it clear that so far as it is concerned no criticism is intended which might play into the hands of other parties, or particularly of a few disgruntled and sore politicians. Though I have been invited to do so I have no wish to enter into any public controversy. I do not think there will be any need, because my impression is that the Manifesto has fallen very flat indeed and that very little notice is going to be taken of it. Nor do I think any convention inaugurated under such conditions is going to do anything more than provide a number of speeches.

I cannot tell you, however, how strongly I feel about the whole business. It seems to me that it has put the clock back a very long way so far as the Free Churches, and especially the Free Church

Council, may be concerned. I should have welcomed with joy a Declaration along similar lines by Church leaders, for I am confident that such a declaration would not only have been fair but it would have been stronger still. I should have been very glad to sign, but I do object most strongly to the Free Churches in a day like this being made to appear to be playing a game that is contrary both to the National Government on the one hand and the Labour Party on the other. There are great and good Christian men in both and they are doing their best. Why should the Free Churches identify themselves with a little middle group, particularly in view of our past experience of such political associations?

Now, my dear man, you know perfectly well that the last thing I want to do is to hurt you and the thing that has troubled me most in the action that I have felt bound to take is that I knew it would cause real regret to Mr Wilson Black and yourself both of whom have always been so good to me. But a man must make his protest when he feels a mistake is being made even if his friends are involved. What am I to do? The one thing I want to gain is that the Free Church Council should quite definitely face this issue and make up its mind whether it is going to be mixed up with this sort of electioneering or not. It appears to me that the only dignified way in which I can raise the issue and have it definitely dealt with is to tender my resignation and submit my views fully in writing to the Council. In that way I shall make my protest. If the Council, whether it agrees with me or not, chooses to say that it appreciates my point of view and has taken note of my protest and hopes I will withdraw my resignation and continue to serve, then I shall be very happy indeed to consider the matter, but obviously feeling as I do I can only stay in if the Council agrees that it has room in it for such a funny chap as myself with my strange ideas, and for other people who curiously enough may be so foolish as to agree with me!

I appreciate more than I can say your effort to get the Free Church Council working on solid constructive lines and I had begun to hope great things of it. Please God this episode will soon fizzle out and be forgotten, and the Free Church Council can go on its way to represent the conscience of the Churches as it ought to be represented and to carry out its mission of evangelism. In these things I am with you all the time.

With all good wishes, Yours ever,

The *Morning Post* reported his resignation: 'Mr Aubrey's resignation is believed to reflect a profound mistrust of the political notions underlying the publication of the manifesto which is shared by large numbers of Non-conformists.' The *Daily Herald* on 20 June, after mentioning Aubrey's resignation, goes on to say: 'Together with Mr Ernest Brown, who is a lay preacher, he intends to begin an agitation for the complete dissociation of Baptists from the "New Deal".' This particular report stimulated Aubrey to make some definitive statement of his position which he did in the *Baptist Times* of 27 June. Copies of his statement were sent also to the *Christian World*, Sir John Simon - the Home Secretary, Ernest Brown, and the Editor of the *Methodist Times*, *Daily Herald*, *Morning Post*, *The Times*, *British Weekly*, *Evening Standard* and to the Press Association and the Central News Agency. In it Aubrey repudiated on behalf of himself and Ernest Brown the claim of the *Daily Herald*. He

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had hoped to remain silent, but the Free Church Council leaders failed to read his accompanying letter when his resignation was discussed. He then rehearsed the arguments again, which we have heard already from his letters. In particular he protests that the manifesto only criticizes and gives no credit. He suggests that in the document the politicians have swallowed up the Christians, and that it is frankly an electioneering manifesto. 'I object to, and protest against, the Church of God or any part of it being dragged through the mire of an electioneering campaign in the wake of any party whatsoever unless there can be no sort of doubt on which side a Christian man must stand.' He appeals for individuals to withdraw their names and suggests that it is a mistake to urge local Free Church Councils to send representation to the Convention. He concludes:

This statement is not official. It commits no-one but myself . . . I have never written anything that I disliked writing more intensely and I hope I shall not have to return to the subject.

His statement was reported at length in *The Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily Dispatch*, the *Birmingham Post*, the *Western Daily Press*, and the *Yorkshire Post*, to name but a few. J. C. Carlile, in the *Baptist Times*, had already begun to backtrack and letters of support began also to arrive on Aubrey's desk which he filed carefully away for future historians to discover. Amongst those who wrote were W. W. Emery, Theo Bamber, Thomas Greenwood, F. E. Sleeman, Tydeman Chilvers, Edward Robinson, H. L. Taylor (from Gothenburg), W. S. Mansfield, and E. A. Timson.

Neville Chamberlain remarked that the primary effect of the Council of Action was to create consternation and division in the ranks of the Free Churches, whose gullible leaders reminded him of that young lady of Riga -

There was a young lady of Riga,  
Who went for a ride on a tiger.  
They returned from the ride  
With the lady inside  
And a smile on the face of the tiger!

Nevertheless, the Convention was held on 2 July and 2,500 delegates turned up. The *News Chronicle* went overboard in reporting it, giving it front page coverage and a whole page spread on page 15, plus editorial comment. From then on, however, the Call gradually ran out of steam. It was a slow process, clearly described by Koss. By 1 October Aubrey could write to Ivory Cripps, Superintendent of the West Midlands, confirming that, as he was now Moderator-elect of the Federal Council, he had told the National Council that, having made his protest, he was prepared to let the matter drop: ' . . . as I think that it would be unseemly for any sort of quarrel to exist between an official of one organisation and the other'. He goes on, 'the way has, however, been made easy for me by the fact that the Council of Action has been such a complete "flop" and the Free Church Council people, so far as I can see, are doing their level best to get out of it. They all know what an incredible act of stupidity they perpetrated when they let themselves be inveigled into this business . . .' Koss records that Miss Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary whom he later married, notes that in the last days of August, 'D's Nonconformist friends are running away again from the Council of Action', whilst at an interview between Lloyd George and Wilson Black and Hughes Lloyd George lost his temper, exclaiming, 'Gideon knew how to distinguish between the funks and the brave men . . . I wish someone would give me that power.'<sup>28</sup> Baldwin went to the country on 14 November and won a considerable victory. Of the 362 candidates approved by local manifestations of the

Council of Action, 67 were elected. Koss concludes: 'The Council of Action proved largely irrelevant, securing Nonconformist support - itself of questionable worth - for candidates who for the most part would have had it anyway.'<sup>29</sup>

But why was Aubrey so determined from the outset on this issue? We may suggest several reasons. It is probable that he read more clearly than many other Free Church leaders what Lloyd George was really after. That he was so aware may possibly have been because of his own contacts in high political places. Significantly he turned first on 7 June, as already seen, to Ernest Brown, who was by no means Lloyd George's best friend. J. H. Shakespeare's son, Geoffrey, held office as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and had been at Cambridge as a student in 1912 when Aubrey went to St Andrew's Street. In a letter that Aubrey wrote to William Olney, a Baptist layman from South London, he says, 'I have myself made it perfectly clear to Prime Ministers and others when they have consulted me that, as the leader of the Baptist Union, I could never play any party game.' Specifically, but without any yet discovered confirming evidence, there is a firm impression in the Aubrey family that M. E. was in fairly close contact with Ramsey Macdonald. Mrs Aubrey used to explain to the children when their father was detained late in London that he was visiting the then Premier Ramsey. Peter Aubrey is sure that this was not a quirky sense of humour on his mother's part to explain her husband's late return. Thus Aubrey may have felt some personal loyalty to the individuals in government. Without wishing in any way to appear cynical, Aubrey was made a Companion of Honour in Coronation year (1937), having earlier refused a somewhat lower honour - one wonders on whose advice? True he was Moderator of the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches in 1937, but that of itself did not guarantee any recognition in the honours list then - or even now! Linked with this was the constant concern to keep the denomination together. By 1935 the Free Churches, including the Baptists, were politically diverse, and in any case support for the National Government was riding relatively high. There was a strong strain of pragmatism in Aubrey's make-up, which enabled him to function as a *compositeur aimable*, which sometimes demanded a softly softly approach and sometimes, as in the Call to Action, a high profile, clear lead.

(To be concluded)

NOTES

- 1 **Baptist Times**, 1 May 1925
- 2 **Baptist Union Handbook**, 1958, pp.337-8. In the first part of the sentence quoted, Payne had written 'Without ever concealing his convictions, he successfully held together the diverse elements in the denomination . . .'
- 3 Letter written from 23 West Street, Warwick, 21 September 1912. At present in possession of the author, but in due course will go to the Angus Library, Regent's Park College.
- 4 E. A. Payne, **The Baptist Union: A Short History**, 1959, pp.194ff.
- 5 Keith W. Clements, **Lovers of Discord**, SPCK 1988, pp.109-29.
- 6 Letter from M. E. Aubrey to all ministers, 4 November 1931. Copy in Ernest Payne's papers in Angus Library.
- 7 H. G. Wood, **Terrot Reaveley Glover**, CUP 1953, p.159.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.160.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Copy in Ernest Payne papers in Angus Library.
- 11 Minutes of Publication Department Committee, 9 February 1932, p.343. Baptist Union Minute Book, 1932.
- 12 See note 6.
- 13 D. W. Bebbington, 'Baptists and Fundamentalism in Inter-War Britain', in Keith Robbins, ed., **Protestant Evangelicalism**, Oxford 1990, pp.297-325.
- 14 *ibid.*, p.320.
- 15 Copy together with documents in notes 6 and 10 in Ernest Payne papers in Angus Library.
- 16 T. R. Glover's diaries are bound with his correspondence in the Library of St John's College, Cambridge. See H. G. Wood, *op.cit.*, p.222 for a description of the diaries.
- 17 Original in St John's College Library, Cambridge. copy with author, and will go to Angus Library with Aubrey Papers.
- 18 For M. E. Aubrey's assessment of T. R. Glover, see BQ XV, 4, October 1953, pp.175-182. See also letter in note 23 below.
- 19 Wood, *op.cit.*, pp.161-3.

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- 18 For M. E. Aubrey's assessment of T. R. Glover, see BQ XV, 4, October 1953, pp.175-182. See also letter in note 23 below.
- 19 Wood, *op.cit.*, pp.161-3.
- 20 *ibid.*, p.162.
- 21 Original in St John's College Library, Cambridge. Copy with author and will go to Angus Library with Aubrey Papers.
- 22 As note 20.
- 23 In Ernest Payne papers in Angus Library. Aubrey re-iterates the moderating influence of men like Percy Evans and Professor Hackney.
- 24 Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, 1975, pp.17-215.
- 25 A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Oxford 1965, p.79 and note 1 on that page.
- Taylor later notes (p.462) that on 8 May 1940 Lloyd George took his revenge on Chamberlain in the debate which led to Chamberlain's resignation as Prime Minister.
- 26 Koss, *op.cit.*, p.195.
- 27 This letter and all the subsequent correspondence quoted and mentioned are in the possession of the author. They were found by two officers of the Baptist Historical Society (the Secretary and the author) during a search for remaining relevant documents in the basement of the Baptist Church House, Southampton Row, just prior to the move to Didcot. In due course all this material will go to the Angus Library.
- 28 Koss, *op.cit.*, p.204.
29. *ibid.*, p.214.

W. M. S. WEST *Vice President, Baptist Historical Society*

### REVIEW

Donald Meek, *Sunshine and Shadow: the story of the Baptists of Mull*, Tiree Books, 1991, 25pp, £2.50 (obtainable from Dr Donald Meek, Department of Celtic, University of Edinburgh, David Hume Tower, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JX).

Dr Meek's authorship guarantees the excellence of this handsomely produced brief history. Sensitively introduced, it tells the story from Dugald Sinclair's pioneering work, exploiting the sparse provision made for the island by the established church, but the effective gathering of a church only took off with the coming of Alexander Grant as resident minister in Mull in 1821 and the baptism of the first Mull residents in 1821-2. Revival and success in mission thereafter prompted persecution, which involved difficulties in securing a meeting place and the dismissal of a schoolmaster when he turned Baptist, perhaps because Baptists became clearly identified with crofter aspirations. For a time Mull school and chapel found shelter in a cave on the foreshore. By the early 1840s the Baptists were accepted and able to develop their witness not only in Mull but began reaching out to other islands too, but all suffered from the twin difficulties of emigration and eviction, making it hard to sustain effective church life in the late 1840s and 1850s. This meant that Alexander Grant had almost to start again in building the church after the deacons of the Tobermory Church emigrated to Australia, but in this he was aided by the impact of the 1859 Revival leading to the building of the new Tobermory Chapel in 1862, which in the 1870s affected the work in the south-west of the island with a fine new church built at Bunessa in 1891, now the only surviving chapel on the island. Dr Meek pays tribute to the leadership of a number of important families, the Gaelic piety of which finds expression in Mary Macdonald's Christmas hymn, 'Child in a manger' (of which an elegant new translation is offered by Dr Meek). Other aspects of this story are the decline in the available Gaelic-speaking ministers, the pastoral ministry of women, the decline of indigenous leadership, leading to the closure of the Tobermory church in 1964. However, changing population patterns, with the development of holiday and retirement homes on the island, have seen the rebirth of Baptist witness, with the renovation not only of the Bunessa chapel but of the whole stance of the church's ministry in seeking to find new relevance for witnessing to eternal truth in a changed social situation.

JHYB