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MERE DENOMINATIONALISM

F. B. Meyer and Baptist Life

The twentieth century has seen a marked weakening in denominational loyalty in Britain. Baptists, like others, have had to come to terms with an evangelicalism which increasingly marginalizes denominational 'labels'. By contrast, the nineteenth century saw a movement in the opposite direction, towards tighter denominational organization. Even then the pre-denominational spirit of an earlier period continued and John Briggs has suggested that the phenomenon of 'denominational affection and wider loyalties' running in harness was most perfectly witnessed by the Baptist Union calling F. B. Meyer as President in 1906.¹ The implication is that Meyer's approach represented a Baptist stream which had continuity with the past. This is partially true: As a campaigner on behalf of all the Free Churches, Meyer exhibited the spirit of an earlier era of Dissent, but his undenominationalism was also shaped, from the 1870s, by his encounter with D. L. Moody and the emerging holiness movement. It was the combined influence of Nonconformist activism and the new evangelicalism of Keswick which led Meyer beyond Baptist denominational boundaries.

Meyer's story is not one of a gradual movement from Baptist loyalty into denominational indifference. His journey was more erratic and shows evidence of recurring internal struggle. While minister of the Baptist church at Regent's Park, London, Meyer accepted in 1892 the presidency of the London Baptist Association, but commented later that he was acting in accordance with the traditions of Regent's Park rather than from personal preference, and that the denominational aspect of his ministry was a drawback.² Yet at the first Baptist World Congress in 1905 Meyer could say, 'I am a Baptist first', and claim, to applause, that 'through all these years there is no man who has been truer to our great principles than myself.'³ Meyer was at that time minister of Christ Church, a non-Baptist church, but presumably his enthusiastic hearers were undeterred by such apparent inconsistency. Throughout his life Meyer retained a concern to promote Baptist life and was strongly committed to believer's baptism. At various times he devoted considerable energy to the cause of the denomination, but at other times his wider interests took precedence. Perhaps a study of the ambiguities of Meyer's ecclesiastical stance can help to illuminate factors at work in the churches today.

BAPTIST CONTEXT OF HIS EARLY LIFE

An early influence drawing Meyer towards the Baptist ministry was William Brock, minister of Bloomsbury Chapel, London, where Meyer's parents worshipped in the 1850s. Brock was a boyhood 'model' for Meyer, and this is significant since it was the outward-looking Brock who encouraged London Baptists to take a higher profile in city life.⁴ Baptized at New Park Road Chapel (in Brixton) in 1864, Meyer's own sense of call to the ministry came at the age of sixteen. He spoke to his father, who advised him to gain wider experience through working in business.⁵ During this formative period Meyer made a point of hearing such famous London

Nonconformist preachers as C. H. Spurgeon, William Landels, Thomas Binney and Joseph Parker. The 'trial sermon', on which his call was judged, was delivered on 20 February 1866 at Bloomsbury Chapel's mission near Seven Dials, and received a cautious but favourable verdict.⁶ He entered Regent's Park College, passing the preliminary college examination in June 1866, and taking a creditable BA through London University three years later.⁷

Meyer was student pastor to an open-communion Baptist group in Richmond and in 1869 he wrote to Spurgeon, then President of the London Baptist Association, saying the denomination was 'most inadequately represented in Richmond', and asking help in establishing something more permanent than the hall in which they were meeting.⁸ Meyer was instrumental in gathering a Baptist church: he was at this stage thoroughly denominational. His Baptist allegiance was reinforced by his period as assistant/associate minister with C. M. Birrell at Pembroke Chapel, Liverpool (1870-2). During his first full pastorate, at Priory Street, York (1872-4), the arrival of D. L. Moody dramatically altered Meyer's ecclesiastical perspective. Through Moody, Meyer saw 'a wider, larger life, in which mere denominationalism could have no place'.⁹ Meyer's growing interest during the 1870s in new teaching about holiness and the inner life confirmed this 'wider view of the divine constitution of the Church of Christ'.¹⁰ Denominationalism began to carry overtones of sectarianism. But Meyer did not abandon his denomination. While at Victoria Road, Leicester (1874-8), he involved himself in Leicestershire Baptist Association affairs, preaching at Association meetings in three consecutive years.¹¹ Meyer found himself at odds with the Victoria Road leadership over his desire to make the church a centre for the evangelization of the working people of Leicester and he resigned in 1878, forming a new Baptist congregation and building Melbourne Hall as its place of worship. This was to be the scene of Meyer's ministry until 1888. His break with Victoria Road could have prejudiced his Baptist connections, but in 1879 his new fellowship applied to join the Association and was 'cordially received'.¹² One of Meyer's principles, in founding Melbourne Hall, was that there should be 'an absence of any marked Denominationalism',¹³ and to this extent Meyer, under the influence of Moody and the holiness ethos, had moved from his early roots. He still believed, however, that it was right to work with those 'with whom my belief in one great subject necessarily allies me'.¹⁴ The subject was baptism.

BAPTISMAL PRINCIPLES WORKED OUT

Meyer's preferred procedure for baptism was most clearly seen at Melbourne Hall, where he inherited no existing traditions. He arranged for the baptistry to be situated outside the main worship sanctuary, in a smaller hall, at variance with normal Baptist architecture.¹⁵ Only a small part of the congregation (which numbered about 1500) could witness a baptism. He intended to make 'the rite of immersion' totally independent from 'questions of church order and discipline'.¹⁶

Meyer's individualism, like John Clifford's, meant that baptism could never be a condition for church membership. The Melbourne Hall Founding Declaration proclaimed the church's 'independence of sister-Churches',¹⁷ at a time when the distinctive position on baptism had been emphasized in denominational terms by influential figures like Joseph Angus and William Landels.¹⁸ Yet Meyer never regarded believer's baptism as unimportant or marginal. Following his next pastorate, at Regent's Park Chapel (1888-92), he moved to Christ Church, which was not a Baptist church but at which he insisted on having a baptistry.¹⁹ The official register of infant baptisms at Christ Church ceased in 1892, when Meyer took over,²⁰ although an associate did baptize infants on parental request.²¹ By now Meyer was a major speaker at the interdenominational Keswick Conventions and his policy was to respect differing convictions. He was also true to his own baptismal convictions, by separating baptisms from Christ Church's public worship.²² As far as possible, Meyer attempted to be an undenominational Baptist.

Although Meyer sought to transcend denominational boundaries, he consistently and enthusiastically promulgated believer's baptism. He was once accused of breaking an unwritten rule at Keswick by distributing Baptist tracts in the convention tent and by urging re-baptism on Anglicans.²³ 'Perhaps no other Baptist minister', Street suggests, 'has immersed so many members of other denominations, including clergymen of the Church of England.'²⁴ Despite this potentially divisive stance, Meyer maintained good relationships with many Anglican clergy. When local Anglicans were coming in large numbers to be baptized at Christ Church, the Lambeth Parish Church Rector had to install his own baptistry in order, Meyer commented, 'to keep even'.²⁵ Meyer claimed that he taught his Anglican neighbour how to baptize by immersion and lent him baptismal 'vestments'. For Free Church ministers, Meyer, as Secretary of the National Free Church Council, produced a *Free Church Service-Manual* (1911) which set out an order for the baptism of believers. Since Baptists at their peak numerical strength in 1906 amounted to little more than one-fifth of the total Nonconformist constituency, infant baptism was practised by the overwhelming majority of Free Churches, yet a form of service for the baptism of children appeared only as an appendix (by H. E. Lewis) to Meyer's *Manual*. Perhaps Meyer's thinking on baptismal practice was able to penetrate Church and chapel thus because he sat loose to ecclesiastical structures. When he proudly claimed in 1927 that all his life he had 'never swerved from believer's baptism',²⁶ half of his ministry had actually been in a non-Baptist setting.

PRAYER UNION

On 20 May 1887 a letter from Meyer appeared in *The Freeman*, suggesting the formation of a prayer union of Baptist ministers. Meyer explained that he had met with clergymen and ministers in all parts of the country anxiously seeking more spiritual power to meet 'the unrest and worldliness of our times'. Without

mentioning the Keswick movement, which was still predominantly Anglican, Meyer was clearly referring to ministers associated with that holiness ethos. 'From these wider circles', he continued, 'I turn to the body with which most of the ministers who read these pages are connected . . .'. He wondered whether, with all the advantages of a better trained ministry and an increasingly wealthy and influential membership, Baptists might be lacking in spiritual power, and suggested that Baptist ministers 'earnestly desirous of more of that power which is promised' should form a bond of union. Meyer was determined to bring Keswick's extradenominational holiness teaching into Baptist life. He asked those wishing to pray for each other 'in the early morning of each Lord's-day' to send a postcard to him. He would then arrange a meeting. Clearly aware of the potential reaction against this proposal to set up a union within the Union, he hoped his idea would not be regarded with disfavour because it did not stem from a 'more prominent member of our body'. In fact, the denominational news column initially welcomed the idea.²⁷ A slightly more guarded comment four months later warned that it was doubtful if spiritual power could be defined, yet conveyed pleasure that a 'considerable number' of ministers had responded to Meyer's initiative.²⁸

As the Baptist Ministers' and Missionaries' Prayer Union developed, Meyer arranged conferences or 'retreats', covering such typical Keswick themes as 'confession and consecration' or 'power for service'. From a membership of 268 at the end of 1887, numbers gradually increased. By September 1888, when a three-day conference was held at Regent's Park Chapel, there were 357 members, about a hundred of whom were able to attend.²⁹ By 1896 770 out of roughly 2000 Baptist ministers belonged. Meyer was only one of a number of speakers at regional Prayer Union events, but he was firmly in control. No other prominent Baptists shared in the leadership and there were no committees. An enthusiastic supporter announced in *The Freeman* on 9 May 1890 that a quiet revolution was taking place and that the Prayer Union, with its 'serene and holy gatherings', was bringing under its influence 'the entire ministry of our denomination'. Meyer's standing within the denomination had grown after giving a paper on 'The Cultivation of the Devout Life' at the 1888 Autumn Assembly of the Baptist Union in Huddersfield.³⁰ Spring and autumn assemblies began to include 'fringe' Prayer Union gatherings. While Keswick was transdenominational, an important part of its appeal for Meyer, a specifically Baptist group gave him unique opportunities to focus on the need for revival and for resolution of problems within the denomination³¹ and to argue that Baptist theology, in which baptism was seen as a symbol of dying with Christ, had natural affinities with holiness teaching.³² All Baptists, in Meyer's view, should be open to the spiritual emphases of the Prayer Union.

The growth of the Prayer Union was not without tensions. *The Freeman*, 12 October 1888, wanted spiritual affinity to cross the 'artificial barriers' created by creeds and declarations. There was undoubtedly a hope that Meyer's work could be harnessed to dampen the doctrinal disagreements plaguing the Baptist Union in

1888-9. So keen was *The Freeman* to play down theological distinctives that on 25 October 1889 it assured readers that the Prayer Union did not ask its members to agree with any doctrine peculiar to the Mildmay Park or Keswick Conventions. These teachings were 'no part of the creed' of the Prayer Union. Meyer's own creed was precisely that of Keswick, but he diplomatically contented himself with saying that membership of the Prayer Union was not a badge of assumed superiority.³³ Meyer had to deal with other, internal, difficulties. A participant in a Quiet Day in 1891 complained about a message delivered by Andrew Mearns, Secretary of the London Congregational Union, containing a call to 'work'. In an 'age of rattle', the correspondent sighed for 'more calm devotion'.³⁴ Meyer saw no contradiction between holiness and activity, but was aware that he could not take everyone with him. Nevertheless, his impact was considerable. The phrase 'another Baptist Union?' appeared in *The Freeman* on 4 October 1889. Meyer was instrumental in the official call in 1890 to Baptists to spend a day in prayer for the 'outpouring of the Spirit of God'.³⁵ By 1896, during Meyer's Christ Church ministry, Congregational ministers were joining with Baptists in the Quiet Days, reported as becoming quieter every year.³⁶ Udenominational holiness teaching was spreading and Baptists had been spiritually affected, as Meyer had intended.

FORWARD MOVEMENT AND DEACONESSES

A different aspect of denominational work in which Meyer had an important place was the Baptist Forward Movement, intended to further the practical and social work of Baptist churches in poor areas. Inspiration for this came from the Forward Movement initiated by the Wesleyan leader, Hugh Price Hughes, so it had a Free Church framework wider than the Baptist family. Meyer approved. Under the auspices of the London Baptist Association, the Baptist Forward Movement was inaugurated in September 1889. Meyer, recently arrived in London, threw himself into the work of the movement, becoming Honorary Superintendent. One project was the provision of a lodging house for men in one of the streets off High Holborn. By the end of 1890 Meyer could report that Dr Percy Lush, an elder at Regent's Park Chapel, was engaged in medical mission, seeing thirty or forty patients a week.³⁷ In sponsoring such progressive ventures, Meyer worked with a team which included John Clifford and F. C. Spurr. For Meyer, the work was a natural consequence of his practical and evangelistic concern for the poor, enabling him to bring a vision from broader Nonconformity to bear on London Baptists.

Perhaps the most significant product of the Baptist Forward Movement was the ministry of deaconesses. The concept owed something to Lutheranism and Anglicanism, although Meyer may have used Bloomsbury's female missionaries or the Mildmay Mission's deaconesses as his most direct model. Meyer secured a house for the use of Baptist deaconesses in 1890 and invited 'Christian ladies', who were willing to contribute £60 per annum towards their own maintenance as deaconesses, to write to him.³⁸ A number responded, at first necessarily drawn

from wealthy families. Later, churches employing deaconesses were asked to pay for their upkeep.³⁹ Four sisters and a lady superintendent began their work, concentrating on the needs of the poor in the Holborn area. With his customary expansionist approach, Meyer wrote; 'There is ample scope here for . . . many devoted women'.⁴⁰ Accommodation for nine or ten was provided. Meyer described the outreach as a doorway 'through which some of the saintliest women in our churches can descend into the slums, carrying the lamp of the Gospel'.⁴¹ In 1894 the Baptist Deaconesses' Home and Mission was launched as an organization independent of the Forward Movement. By 1907 there were about twenty deaconesses working with Baptist churches. J. C. Carlile has described how two deaconesses came to help in the church he was pastoring in London's docklands. One or two traditional Baptists in the congregation were unhappy about these women wearing uniforms which seemed to ape Catholic orders. The sisters were, however, able to go round unmolested, caring for the sick.⁴² By proving their practical benefit, Meyer was able to make deaconesses an acceptable form of Baptist ministry.

BAPTIST CONTROVERSY

When Spurgeon, convinced that some Baptist ministers had departed from traditional evangelical doctrines, resigned from the Baptist Union in October 1887, Meyer's involvement was mainly at the level of the London Baptist Association. On 23 March 1888, however, he wrote to *The Freeman*, declaring, 'The Baptist Union is a glorious engine for good, let us not wreck it.' If the Union was not evangelically 'sound at its heart', then it was better to leave it than compromise, but if, as he strongly believed, it was evangelical, it was a great mistake to leave. Meyer argued that the Baptist Union could not be held responsible for a few 'chance utterances' by some ministers, and he appealed to evangelicals to appoint delegates to the Baptist Union Council who were 'true to the old faith'. Only if the denominational current was overwhelmingly against evangelical efforts could Meyer justify separation. This must have given some reassurance to battle-weary Union leaders. A month later Meyer wrote: 'Some of us are eager to retain our connection with institutions so capable of mighty results; using any influence we possessed on behalf of Evangelicalism.'⁴³ Meyer's aim, as a Keswick evangelical, was to ensure that the Baptist Union was a body with which he could identify.

Meyer, committed to conciliation rather than division, felt deeply the rift between Spurgeon and the Union leadership. He was 'utterly disheartened' by the loss of Spurgeon but, like almost all his ministerial colleagues, ultimately aligned himself with the denominational leadership. Spurgeon proceeded to resign from the London Baptist Association in April 1888. Meyer proposed in June 1888 that a special meeting of the Association should be held, apparently to prevent the sizeable body of Spurgeon's men from leaving the Association. At the meeting, on 25 September 1888, Meyer introduced a resolution which expressed sympathy with the desire to guard against teaching inconsistent with 'those views of truth known as Evangelical';

called for allegiance to those views, to the extent that pastors disloyal to them should not continue in the Association; suggested a policy on dealing with defections privately and lovingly; and advocated rejection of a credal basis for the Association on the grounds that the bond between Christians was life rather than creed, and that creeds failed to exclude error, were alien to Free Churches and did not appear in the New Testament.⁴⁴ Meyer claimed he would rather have been a quiet listener to the debate. This is hardly convincing. Since he had called the meeting, he could hardly have taken a passive role. Probably he was being used by the LBA leaders as a reconciling figure who commanded wide respect. Meyer's resolution, with one amendment, was accepted by all but twenty-three of the two hundred present.⁴⁵ Although this appeared to be a significant victory, the amendment was that a committee be appointed to prepare a declaration on the meaning of evangelical sentiments. Meyer had not attempted to define these, contenting himself with the comment that we know 'in heart' what evangelical means. By avoiding theological precision, Meyer was probably attempting to retain a broadly based evangelical coalition within the London Association.

Theological problems would not leave Meyer alone. The committee of the Association set up to produce a statement of belief included Joseph Angus, John Clifford and Meyer. Clifford commented later that he had been surprised by the unanimity of doctrinal opinion belonging to supposedly opposing members. Meyer talked about the 'hearty good feeling'.⁴⁶ Clifford might encourage newer theological thought in the denomination,⁴⁷ but the LBA declaration which the committee formulated restated traditional evangelical doctrines.⁴⁸ Meyer would have been satisfied with nothing less. All agreed that the statement did not have credal authority.⁴⁹ The declaration was considered by the Association in October 1888. Meyer stated that his 'dread' of creeds was very real, and spoke strongly against the idea of a 'credal basis', but the Spurgeonite members were unimpressed. Divisions were deep.⁵⁰ Twenty-six Spurgeonites tendered their resignations in protest at the avoidance of a definitive statement of faith. Meyer was disappointed but determined to win the confidence of the substantial conservative element.⁵¹ Negotiations continued and, following a further meeting in January 1889, David Gracey acknowledged in a letter to Spurgeon that Meyer's contribution 'left nothing to be desired' and was 'out and out Evangelical'.⁵² The LBA adopted the declaration of belief,⁵³ peace was restored and resignations were retracted. Meyer's part in preserving unity was crucial.

The controversy was blowing over but Meyer was not yet clear of the 'whole dreary business' of the Downgrade.⁵⁴ Prior to the 1889 Baptist Union autumn meetings, there was an attack on Clifford in *The Baptist*. Meyer came quickly to his defence.⁵⁵ Some of Spurgeon's followers felt bitter. John Urquhart, a minister in Weston-super-Mare, writing to *The Freeman* on 11 October about Meyer's support of Clifford, described Meyer as among the 'slumbering members of the Union' who were 'keeping their eyes shut to what was happening'. Spurgeon's

death prompted more reflections on the Downgrade. In February 1892 Meyer paid tribute to Spurgeon's greatness, but voiced his opinion that depression had clouded something of his clear vision so that he looked at faults as they were presented by 'weaker and narrower minds'.⁵⁶

Further doctrinal imbroglios were about to claim Meyer's attention. C. F. Aked, now minister of Pembroke Chapel, had exchanged pulpits with a Unitarian, and critical correspondents took the opportunity to ask Meyer how he could remain in the Baptist Union when this was being tolerated. 'The incident', said Meyer, 'was a great grief to me'. He would prefer to recognize the ministerial standing of a good Roman Catholic than of a Unitarian, but insisted that he would not make Spurgeon's mistake of leaving the Union because of 'one or two of its members'.⁵⁷ Meyer expressed his intention in March 1892 to bring the matter formally to the Baptist Union Council. Letters raged in *The Freeman*. A resolution, that the Union deprecated any association with those who denied essential truths like the deity of Christ, was put to the spring assembly by Charles Williams, seconded by Meyer, and overwhelmingly accepted. There was no appetite for debate. Meyer was regarded as having started this controversy and when, later in the year, he resigned from Regent's Park Chapel and from the LBA Presidency, he indicated that the Aked episode had influenced his decision. If he had stayed at the Chapel, then recent events would have involved him in a controversy for which he had 'no inclination or adaptation'.⁵⁸ The Baptist Union Secretary, J. H. Shakespeare, referring to this, commented that in the Baptist denomination Meyer always seemed to be confronting stone walls, so that he had to 'jump over them and escape'.⁵⁹ Faced with Baptist difficulties, undenominationalism, in the form of ministry at Christ Church, presented an attractive refuge.

FREE CHURCHMAN

In 1890 the first suggestion of a national Free Church Council was made by Guinness Rogers, a Congregational leader. He envisaged a national Congress and Council which would assist Free Church evangelism, fellowship, and 'common Christian work'. These were concepts close to Meyer's heart and he quickly gave the idea his backing.⁶⁰ From 1892, as minister of Christ Church, Meyer had the opportunity to put into practice at local level the idea of a Free Church which united Baptist and Congregational ingredients. This experience undoubtedly strengthened his commitment to drawing the Free Churches together. In October 1897 the first issue of *The Free Churchman* appeared, with Meyer as editor.⁶¹ Over the following twenty years Meyer was to be close to the centre of Free Church life in England, steering the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches through uncharted political waters. He insisted that to be a Free Churchman was not 'a matter of politics, but of religion'.⁶² He saw the Free Churches as a powerful spiritual force and his vision was of Baptists 'in the front rank'.⁶³

Meyer consolidated his position within the Free Church Council movement as

National President in 1904-5. J. C. Carlile, with a journalist's sense of timing, hoped that Meyer would go on some day to be President of the Baptist Union, arguing that Baptists needed him and that he owed it to the denomination.⁶⁴ This wish was soon fulfilled, but involvement in Baptist affairs could not satisfy Meyer; for most of the period 1907-12 his priority was his role as a chief representative of the Free Churches. Shakespeare appears to have been influenced in his drive for a united Free Church by the example of Meyer, whom he referred to eulogistically in 1918 as a united Free Church of England himself, and one who witnessed throughout the world to Christian unity.⁶⁵ Meyer was a Baptist delegate to conferences on Free Church federation, and one of thirteen Baptist leaders who recommended the idea.⁶⁶ A resultant resolution that the Baptist Union join the United Free Church of England was carried virtually unanimously by the 1918 Assembly. The ultra-conservative James Mountain complained that the basis of faith for the united church was inadequate, but Meyer both defended it and claimed that the Holy Spirit, not a doctrinal statement, was the 'custodian of evangelical truth'.⁶⁷ Shakespeare wanted to go further down the ecumenical road, and Meyer may have had some sympathy, but the policy did not command support in the denomination. Meyer was by this time drifting away from denominational life, but his stance had given to Baptists a heightened sense of their wider Free Church identity.

BAPTIST UNION PRESIDENT

Meyer was elected Vice-President of the Baptist Union in July 1905. The previous year he had stood and received only seventeen votes, but this time he received 502 of 663 votes cast. The *Baptist Times* campaigned on Meyer's behalf in 1905, arguing that, since his position in the Christian world was unique, it had been prepared to break its own rules of neutrality and present his case. Meyer, declared the *Baptist Times* of 14 July, belonged to all the churches, but was a Baptist by conviction. Moreover, he had blended political and pietistic concerns, or 'Cliffordised his Keswick', unlike others whose 'practical influence had disappeared' as a result of Keswick teaching. Shakespeare, as the Union's chief promoter, gleefully pronounced it a great gain to have 'publicly branded' Meyer, through his presidency, as a Baptist minister.⁶⁸ Shakespeare was a good judge of character and fully aware of Meyer's gifts. Perhaps more than anyone else, Shakespeare realized the loss suffered by the denomination through Meyer's absence.⁶⁹ The task which Shakespeare set himself of drawing Baptist churches together would have been easier if Meyer's bridging ministry had been consistently in operation. Temperamentally, Shakespeare and Meyer were natural allies, both believing that church bodies thrived on firm oversight.⁷⁰ Shakespeare lamented that denominations became hard and fast in their routine and cast out their greatest sons. This was strong comment, since the Baptist Union had never shunned Meyer, but presumably Shakespeare wanted to stir up both Meyer and the denomination. Challenges from leading

Baptists like Shakespeare to bring influence to bear on the denomination had tremendous attraction for Meyer.

In his presidential address to the Baptist Union Assembly in April 1906, Meyer displayed his power to draw together the different elements among Baptists.⁷¹ Speaking for eighty minutes, punctuated by bursts of cheering, he appealed to the Prayer Union constituency, asking that the year should be 'marked by a renewal of the Spirit of God throughout the whole denomination'. He exploited his transdenominational position, seeing his election as a recognition by Baptists that, however wide his sympathies with all the churches of Christ, his loyalty to distinctive Baptist principles had not wavered. Meyer argued that Baptist churches ('may I not say the Baptist Church?'), acting together with other Free Churches, were equipped to give leadership to the nation in a way which the established Church could not do. It is significant that Meyer deliberately used the phrase 'the Baptist Church', fully aware that it indicated a centralizing direction which was anathema to many Baptists. Meyer had his sights on closer union between Baptist churches and also on a broader Free Church unity. Other parts of Meyer's address appealed to the practically and socially-minded. The 'true sociology', he said, would deal in justice rather than charity. He stressed the plight of many women in early twentieth-century society and wondered if women needed a world-wide Trade Union to ensure adequate wages: 'Let us teach society,' he urged, 'to realize that we are our sisters' keepers.' Meyer, the evangelist, also proposed that Baptist churches should have nothing to do with 'pernicious' diversions like whist-drives or bazaars, but should concentrate on reaching the working classes through simpler services and a more democratic pew system. Meyer's address was regarded by *The British Weekly* as one of the 'wisest' every delivered to the English people.⁷² Meyer's ability to act as a unifying influence, significant in the wider evangelical world, had been demonstrated in his own denomination.

As President, Meyer, usually with Shakespeare, undertook a punishing schedule of visitation and evangelism in Baptist churches, especially in rural areas. Meyer was the preacher and the tour had for him the aura of the evangelistic travels of Wesley, Whitefield or Charles Finney. Before he began, Meyer acquainted himself with Finney's methods.⁷³ With his imagination soaring, Meyer saw himself preaching the gospel 'beside the stocks where my forefathers suffered'.⁷⁴ Midway through his tour, he spoke to the autumn meetings of the Baptist Union. By then even more radical than when he began, having seen the bitter poverty of many village pastors, Meyer suggested a limit on the supply of ministers, grouping churches together, a better educated ministry, and a recognition that Baptist aims were 'identical with' those of Labour and social reformers.⁷⁵ He was convinced that Baptist ministers, rather than Anglicans, were fitted to be the instructors of this 'virile period of the world's mature age'.⁷⁶ True to his conciliatory approach, he said what pleasure it gave him to have Aked on the platform.⁷⁷ At the end of the year Shakespeare was euphoric, saying of Meyer's presidential ministry that he

thought no such succession of helpful meetings had been held in the history of the denomination.⁷⁸ It had been hoped that the churches would catch 'the contagion' of Meyer's 'passion for the evangelization of our land'.⁷⁹ But 1906 marked the high point of Baptist membership; instead of the rising tide anticipated, the ebb began.

SUSTENTATION FUND

Shakespeare, with his relentless drive to strengthen Baptist structures, drew Meyer more fully into the denominational fold for a further period of six years from 1909. Prior to this he had been urging Meyer to work from a permanent base rather than as an itinerant minister. Meyer had resigned as minister of Christ Church in 1907 and was travelling so extensively that he was no longer deeply rooted in the church there. It was W. Y. Fullerton's view, from a denominational perspective, that Meyer might have 'floated about the world as a derelict'.⁸⁰ Shakespeare had a strategic scheme with which to tempt Meyer. The plan was to raise £250,000 to support the stipends of poor Baptist ministers. He believed Meyer was the best person to give weight to an appeal of this size and, with his sound psychological understanding of his colleagues, he undoubtedly played on Meyer's instinct for hard work and sympathy for poorer ministers. Meyer responded. As early as July 1908 he wrote to Shakespeare from South Africa about the 'great work' they would do together 'for Christ and our denomination'.⁸¹ Meyer accepted the logic of the argument that to be effective in the denominational campaign he needed to be a minister of a Baptist church. His return to Regent's Park Chapel for a second ministry (1909-15) was therefore an integral part of a long-term plan to launch the 'Sustentation Fund' campaign in 1912. From his time as President, Meyer knew the situation of rural Baptist ministers, at least half of whom probably earned less than £100 per annum and some of whom, he was to allege, were the worst paid in Christendom.⁸² He could not resist the call to meet this area of denominational need.

The Sustentation Fund appeal was duly launched. Meyer conceived the idea of using as a visual publicity motif the building of Nehemiah's wall, with 250 stones, each equivalent to £1,000.⁸³ Shakespeare became unwell, and the main fund-raising work fell to Meyer, whose prodigious energy stood him in good stead. Almost every week for over a year he had a page in the *Baptist Times* in which he reported on the accumulation of the Fund and the ideas being generated for this purpose. He commended the making of 'Sustentation Marmalade', which he described as a 'brilliant suggestion'.⁸⁴ More bizarre was the lady with the 'Sustentation dog', which caught rabbits to be sold for the benefit of the Fund.⁸⁵ Meyer's normal, spiritual priorities seem, for a time, to have become less distinct. 'Fancie Fairs' were apparently as important as prayers.⁸⁶ The financial goal obsessed Meyer and dominated his schedules throughout 1913, making this a highly denominational period. He saw the Fund as drawing Baptists together in an

unprecedented display of unity and enthusiasm.⁸⁷ After allowance is made for Meyer's rhetoric, the denominational response was remarkable. Meyer's leadership found people ready to be led. Even Archibald McCaig, the conservative Principal of Spurgeon's College, though suspicious of Shakespeare's centralizing ministerial scheme, supported Meyer.⁸⁸ Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, spoke at two Sustentation events.⁸⁹ As the momentum developed, Meyer became ever more confident that this was the hour for the denomination to move forward.⁹⁰ He held successful and highly entertaining meetings all over the country. In September 1913 he admitted, however, that three out of every four churches had not participated.⁹¹ Some congregations, like his own Regent's Park Chapel, gave very large amounts.⁹² At the 1914 spring assembly it was announced that the target had been reached. Meyer was by now exhausted, and despite Shakespeare's hope that he would continue his influence in the denomination he was soon to move once more to Christ Church for his final pastorate, from 1915 to 1920.

INTERNATIONAL BAPTIST

Meyer's international ministry began in 1891 with a visit to the USA to speak at Moody's Northfield Conference. On 19 September 1890 *The Freeman* had reported that A. J. Gordon, a leading American Baptist and colleague of Moody's, was to be President of an American Prayer Union, evidently modelled on Meyer's British initiative. Through Northfield, Meyer and Gordon became firm friends. During the 1890s Meyer was a regular, and highly acclaimed, speaker at Northfield, and became probably the best known minister in the evangelical community worldwide.⁹³ Although much of this ministry was interdenominational, Meyer also forged Baptist contacts. In 1902 he preached in Estonia and was fascinated to discover that the 'gift of tongues' was heard quite often in Estonian Baptist services.⁹⁴ As Meyer was told about cases of people delivered from evil spirits, he felt compelled to 'read the Bible again from a new standpoint' and to pray for power to 'cast out the spirits'.⁹⁵ On the same tour in 1902, he spoke in Sweden, at the Södertälje convention organized annually by Prince Bernadotte and in Örebro Baptist Church, where the influential John Ongman stood close to holiness spirituality.⁹⁶ Three years later in July 1905 Meyer addressed the first Baptist World Congress, held in London. Because of the variety of nationalities and languages, and the spiritual power which he observed, Meyer called it a 'veritable Pentecost'. When Meyer came to deliver a key-note message he was greeted with tremendous excitement, the galleries breaking into a 'white foam of handkerchiefs'. The motto Meyer proposed - from Michelangelo - was typical: '*Amplius*', meaning 'Wider'.⁹⁷ Meyer easily adopted a transnational Baptist role.

From this international platform, Meyer became involved in other Baptist schemes. In 1908 he spent six months on an advisory mission in South Africa, sponsored by the English Free Churches, and his pan-denominational brief gave him the opportunity to investigate South African Baptist life. He found that discussions

were taking place on how to improve standards in the ministry, a subject close to his heart. On his return to England, he raised £1,000 to assist new Baptist developments in South Africa.⁹⁸ By 1910 Meyer's ability to generate finance was being widely recognized and he was drawn into an appeal on behalf of Eastern Europe. The plan was to establish a theological seminary in St Petersburg or Moscow to train at any one time two to three hundred students for Baptist ministry. At the 1910 autumn Baptist Union Assembly in Glasgow, Meyer interrupted the programme to ask for financial pledges for the project.⁹⁹ Promises quickly came in and over £1,750 was raised.¹⁰⁰ This was a mere warming-up exercise for Meyer. In 1911, at the second Baptist World Alliance Congress in Philadelphia, Meyer produced at one session pledges of \$66,000 for the seminary, calling the project the greatest act Baptists had done in all the centuries.¹⁰¹ The initial enthusiast had been an American, A. J. Vining, and the 'Baptist University', as it was being called, was to be a joint American and British venture. There was talk of Meyer visiting the Czar to seek permission to build.¹⁰² In the event a period of persecution, followed by the First World War and the Revolution, hindered any progress. The fund simply accumulated and in 1951, by which time it amounted to \$98,000, discussions were still taking place about how to use it.¹⁰³ Meyer's global vision for evangelicalism embraced Baptist life but he could not turn all his dreams into reality.

CONCLUSION

Meyer's involvement in 1918 in discussions on Free Church federation was his last significant contribution to the Baptist denomination. From then on, his leadership of the premillennial movement in Britain led him further into undenominationalism. Nevertheless, he still identified himself as a Baptist. In 1921 he suggested that the Baptist Union should create a department for women's work and set up a college to train women as deaconesses and ministers.¹⁰⁴ At Keswick, Meyer was still reported in the 1920s as one of the 'Baptist' speakers.¹⁰⁵ He retained an active interest in the Prayer Union - which became the Fraternal Union - with its witness to the life 'anointed by Pentecost for service'.¹⁰⁶ Ambiguities, of course, persisted. In 1926 Meyer spoke of being 'entangled' by denominational alliances and warned Christ Church against becoming involved in any ecclesiastical organization or movement.¹⁰⁷ Yet in 1928 he could write to M. E. Aubrey, who had become Baptist Union Secretary and whose leadership Meyer valued, claiming: 'My loyalty to our great testimony as Baptists has never faltered'.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the key is that Meyer's allegiance was to the Baptist 'testimony' (i.e. baptism), rather than to the organization. Shakespeare continued to the end to give Meyer the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that just as 'Anglicanism had no room for Baxter or Wesley', so Baptists had not 'made the most' of Meyer. Shakespeare was nearer the truth when he went on to compare Meyer with Thomas à Kempis or Francis of Assisi. Like these spiritual leaders before him, Meyer was often on the fringe of

established church structures. In his own words, there was a 'mystic thread' between Baptist Church House, where his portrait hung in his later years, and himself.¹⁰⁹ The undenominationalist was still a Baptist.

The *British Weekly* of 4 October 1906 assessed Meyer's influence among Baptists as a re-affirmation of the permanent elements in Baptist life, coupled with far-seeing statements about new departures. In the late 1880s he was a 'rising power' in the denomination and when calls came to give practical help to the Union - as a mediator, a President, or an active fund-raiser - he was ready to respond. But Meyer found it impossible to fulfil himself solely within the Baptist constituency. His wider Free Church commitments were important, providing as they did an outlet for his social activism, while his spiritual roots were in Keswick. Some of Meyer's Baptist initiatives sprang from his Free Church associations; in others the influence of the holiness movement was dominant. For the most part, however, Meyer blended activist and pietistic elements, and this constituted both his strength and his weakness in terms of Baptist life. Meyer's wide-ranging sympathies meant that he could appeal to disparate elements in the denomination and act as a reconciler. His tendency to move from one project to another - the 'new departures' - meant that he was never able to build a solid denominational following.

The only later Baptist figure whose range of commitments approximated to the pattern set by Meyer was W. Y. Fullerton, trained under Spurgeon but more deeply affected by Meyer.¹¹⁰ Fullerton was by turn an evangelist, pastor of Melbourne Hall, a popular Keswick speaker and Home Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society. The prevailing trend, by contrast, was for Keswick or Advent Testimony leaders to be less orientated towards society and less denominational. The streams within evangelicalism which Meyer had attempted to hold together diverged as the twentieth century progressed, although more recently there has been a measure of convergence, with social and spiritual concerns being seen as interrelated. Undenominational, Meyer-like evangelicalism has tended to grow in importance in the latter half of this century. Against this background, contemporary Baptist denominational leaders may be able to draw something from the vision of the expansive J. H. Shakespeare, who attempted to harness Meyer's energies for the Baptist community. While these efforts had a degree of success, Meyer's priorities were such that his potential to shape Baptist affairs was never fully realized.

NOTES

- 1 J. H. Y. Briggs, 'Charles Haddon Spurgeon and the Baptist Denomination in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *BQ* 31, (1986), p.221.
- 2 M. J. Street, *F. B. Meyer: His Life and Work*, 1902, p.85.
- 3 *First Baptist World Congress: Authorized Record of Proceedings*, 1905, p.21.
- 4 C. M. Birrell, *Life of William Brock*, 1878, p.169; I. Sellers, *Nineteenth-Century Nonconformity*, 1977, p.14; F. Bowers, *Called to the City: Three Ministers of Bloomsbury*, 1989, pp.18-19.
- 5 Street, *op. cit.*, pp.29, 33. Meyer came from three generations of businessmen.
- 6 *Baptist Times* (hereafter *BT*), 7 April 1927, p.239; Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer: A Biography*, 1929, p.15.
- 7 *Report of the Committee of the Baptist College (late at Stepney and now) at Regent's Park*, 1869. Meyer was given special mention by the Greek and Latin

- examiner for the high character of his work, p.9.
- 8 H. Young, *The Duke Street Story*, 1970, p.16; Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.23.
 - 9 F. B. Meyer, *The Bells of Is: Or Voices of Human Need and Sorrow*, 1894, p.17.
 - 10 *The Christian*, 5 February 1925, p.6.
 - 11 *Report of the Leicestershire Association of Baptist Churches for 1875, 1876, 1877*.
 - 12 *Leicestershire Association Report*, 1879, p.7.
 - 13 E. E. Kendall, *Doing and Daring*, Rushden, 1955, p.31.
 - 14 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, p.17.
 - 15 I am indebted to Paul Bassett, minister of Melbourne Hall, for information about baptismal arrangements (conversation, 6 June 1988). The trust deeds, clause 5, state: 'any part of the said premises other than the main Hall may be used. . . for the baptism in the form only of immersion in water. . . '.
 - 16 F. B. Meyer, *Seven Reasons for Believer's Baptism*, 1882, p.3.
 - 17 Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp.18-19. The Declaration was made on 23 September 1878.
 - 18 See *Baptist Handbook*, 1866, p.153, for Angus' encouragement to 'stand aloof' from paedobaptists. For Landels, see T. D. Landels, *William Landels*, 1900, pp.223, 230.
 - 19 Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.85.
 - 20 Christ Church register of baptisms, in Lambeth Archives, Minet Library, 52 Knatchbull Rd, London SE5 9QY.
 - 21 W. Benson, an evangelist associated with Christ Church, was willing to baptize infants: Booth Collection, B271, 26 February 1900, p.233.
 - 22 The Christ Church elders told the Congregational Union that they did not consider it strictly a Congregational Church (Elders Meeting Minutes, 5 September 1898). Neither was it, of course, a Baptist church.
 - 23 J. C. Pollock, *The Keswick Story*, 1964, p.104.
 - 24 Street, *op.cit.*, p.85.
 - 25 *BT*, 7 April 1927, p.239.
 - 26 *ibid.*
 - 27 *Freeman*, 20 May 1887, pp.326, 336.
 - 28 *Freeman*, 30 September 1887, p.629.
 - 29 *Freeman*, 14 September 1888, pp.604-5.
 - 30 Published as F. B. Meyer, *The Cultivation of the Devout Life*, 1888.
 - 31 *Freeman*, 12 July 1888, pp.474, 509.
 - 32 *Freeman*, 25 September 1896, p.505.
 - 33 *Freeman*, 1 November 1889, p.733.
 - 34 *Freeman*, 2 October 1891, p.645.
 - 35 *Freeman*, 25 October 1889, p.705.
 - 36 *Freeman*, 25 September 1896, p.505.
 - 37 *Freeman*, 12 December 1890, p.820.
 - 38 *Freeman*, 14 February 1890, p.109.
 - 39 *Freeman*, 3 October 1890, p.109; *BT* 4 January 1907, Supplement p.V. The contribution was still £60 per annum.
 - 40 Report to London Baptist Association, cited in historical review of deaconess movement, *BT*, 15 October 1987, p.10.
 - 41 D. M. Rose, *Baptist Deaconesses*, 1954, p.10.
 - 42 J. C. Carlile, *My Life's Little Day*, 1935, p.73-4.
 - 43 *Freeman*, 13 April 1888, p.232.
 - 44 *Freeman*, 21 September 1888, p.620; 28 September 1888, pp.635-7.
 - 45 *Freeman*, 28 September, 1888, p.637.
 - 46 *Freeman*, 11 January 1889, p.19; 19 October 1888, p.702.
 - 47 Clifford's approach is outlined by M. T. E. Hopkins, 'Spurgeon's Opponents in the Downgrade Controversy'. *BQ* 32, 1988, p.284.
 - 48 *Freeman*, 19 October 1888, p.689. The LBA statement was similar to the BU Council's declaration of 23 April 1888.
 - 49 It was the preamble to this effect which caused problems. See *Freeman*, 19 October 1888, p.689. Spurgeon's followers wanted the preamble removed so the statement would carry more authority.
 - 50 The attempt to delete the preamble saying the declaration was not a creed was defeated, but 77 out of 178 opposed Meyer. See E. A. Payne, 'The Down Grade Controversy: A Postscript', *BQ* 28, 1979, p.156.
 - 51 *Freeman*, 11 January 1889, p.18. Meyer said those who did not hold the doctrines in the declaration should not be in the Association.
 - 52 Letter: David Gracey to Spurgeon, 9 January 1889, in Spurgeon's College archives.
 - 53 It was printed with subsequent LBA annual reports, but ministers were not required to give assent to the statement of belief.
 - 54 *Freeman*, 13 April 1888, p.232.
 - 55 E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union*, 1958, p.144. The issue concerned Clifford's apparent acceptance that atheists could be part of the church. Meyer clarified what Clifford was saying, that the church should put 'service before creed'.
 - 56 At the Memorial Service for all denominations on 10 February 1892 Meyer, the last speaker, called Spurgeon a leading officer in a great campaign, ed. W. Y. Fullerton, *From the Pulpit to the Palm-Branch*, 1892, p.151; *Freeman*, 5 February 1892, p.86.
 - 57 *Freeman*, 4 March 1892, p.158.
 - 58 *Freeman*, 22 July 1892, p.510; Letter of July 1892 in Regent's Park Chapel minute book.
 - 59 *BT*, 4 January 1907, Supplement p.VI.
 - 60 E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity: A History of the Free Church Council Movement 1896-1941*, 1956, p.20; *Methodist Times*, 20 February 1890, p.174.

- 61 Meyer's editorial said it spoke for Free Churches, which meant more than Nonconformist: 'That was negative - this is positive', *Free Churchman*, October 1897, p.2.
- 62 *Free Churchman*, November 1897, p.22.
- 63 *BT*, 27 April 1906, p.308.
- 64 *BT*, 18 March 1904, p.235.
- 65 J. H. Shakespeare, *The Churches at the Cross-Roads*, 1918, p.208.
- 66 *BT*, 8 March 1918, pp.148-9.
- 67 *BT*, 3 May 1918, p.277.
- 68 *BT*, 27 July 1906, p.547.
- 69 An article by Shakespeare formed part of a special supplement to the *BT* on Meyer, 4 January 1907, Supplement pp.III-VI.
- 70 Payne, *Baptist Union*, p.169. Meyer had no rooted objection to episcopal church government, regarding it as a matter of convenience: F. B. Meyer, *The Religious Basis of the Free Church Position*, 1903, p.11.
- 71 *BT*, 27 April 1906, pp.305-10.
- 72 *British Weekly (BW)*, 26 April 1906, p.47. *The Times*, 24 April 1906, p.4, gave a full report of Meyer's presidential address.
- 73 *BT* 27 July 1906, p.550.
- 74 *BW* 22 March 1906, p.667.
- 75 *BW* 4 October 1906, pp.611, 629-30. Ministerial over-supply was an enduring problem for Baptists. See K. D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales 1800-1930*, Oxford 1988, p.167. Meyer argued that dwindling villages could not support vigorous churches and wanted 'District' churches in each town (*BW* 6 December 1906, p.255).
- 76 *BT*, 5 October 1906, p.X.
- 77 *BW*, 4 October 1906, p.611. Aked spoke at Meyer's last anniversary at Christ Church and was mentioned in connection with the vacancy: *BW* 12 July 1906, p.343.
- 78 *BT*, 26 April 1907, p.330.
- 79 *BT*, 14 July 1905, p.509.
- 80 Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.89.
- 81 Letter: Meyer to Shakespeare, 28 July 1908, quoted Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.89.
- 82 *BT*, 14 March 1913, p.213. For Baptist stipends in 1911, see Brown, *op.cit.*, p.158.
- 83 Payne, *Baptist Union*, p.175.
- 84 *BT*, 31 January 1913, p.93.
- 85 *BT*, 23 May 1913, p.397.
- 86 *BT*, 24 October 1913, p.805.
- 87 *BT*, 2 May 1913, p.XV.
- 88 *BT*, 11 April 1913, p.289.
- 89 *BT*, 13 October 1913, p.840. Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.92, refers to a meeting on 1 May 1914 with Lloyd George presiding.
- 90 *BT*, 14 March 1913, p.213; 11 April, p.289; 4 July, p.517.
- 91 *BT*, 12 September 1913, p.693.
- 92 Regent's Park Chapel gave £4,888. *BT* 14 November 1913, p.881.
- 93 S. Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention*, 1952, p.182.
- 94 *Christian* 27 February 1902, p.19.
- 95 *Christian*, 6 March 1902, p.18.
- 96 Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.197; and information from David Lagergren, Stockholm.
- 97 *BW* 20 July 1905, p.363.
- 98 H. J. Batts, *The Story of a Hundred Years 1820-1920: The History of the Baptist Church in South Africa*, Cape Town, 1920, p.129.
- 99 *BT* 14 October 1910, p.673, Supplement p.IX.
- 100 *ibid.*; *CW* 13 October 1910, p.15.
- 101 *BT* 7 July 1911, p.419; *The Baptist World Alliance Second Congress*, Philadelphia, 1911, p.242.
- 102 *ibid.* p.265; *BT* 7 July 1911, p.419.
- 103 F. T. Lord, *Baptist World Fellowship: A Short History of the Baptist World Alliance*, 1955, p.155.
- 104 Carlile, *op.cit.*, p.166. For background, see A. M. Royden, *The Church and Woman*, 1925, pp.124-5..
- 105 *BT* 18 July 1924, p.479.
- 106 Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.67.
- 107 J. W. Read, ed., *Christ Church Souvenir Jubilee Year Book*, 1926, p.7.
- 108 Letter: Meyer to Aubrey, 6 January 1928, quoted in Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.93.
- 109 Fullerton, *Meyer*, p.94.
- 110 For Fullerton's indebtedness to Spurgeon and Meyer, see *The Life of Faith*, 24 January 1912, p.85, and 7 February 1912, p.141.

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APOLOGY: We regret that in the contents list of the July 1992 edition of the Baptist Quarterly, the name of Michael A. G. HAYKIN was incorrectly given as Haydin. We apologize to Professor Haykin and to readers for this error.