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# DOUBLE AFFIRMATIONS: BAPTISTS SINCE 1945

Dr West's ministry in the Baptist denomination, occupying almost forty years of service, prompts the question as to what changes and challenges have come to Baptists as the twentieth century progresses towards its maturity.

Denominational leadership for much of these forty years has been largely concerned with managing the contraction of well-ordered churches, attempting to halt the retreat. More recently, accepted patterns of churchmanship have been challenged by a new vitality, often apparently disrespectful of the received order. The new vitality, which at its best has revitalized moribund churches, deepened commitment, and brought a powerful spiritual energy into the life of the churches, is a real cause of thankfulness to God. At other times, the outcome has been divisive, embracing on occasions the acceptance of brittle and naive theological clichés, and an unhealthy seeking for signs, as uninterested in the general sustaining work of the Spirit as apparently oblivious of Our Lord's own warnings about sign-seeking. Such are the problems of the 1980s. Essentially they are new problems in so far as they are problems of life and growth, not death and decline. The impact of these influences on Baptist churches, as also the parallel growth of churches which are baptistic rather than Baptist, prompts questions as to what is a Baptist Church which is all to the good in so far as it drives us back first to the scriptures and then to the reformed and evangelical traditions from which we spring, to test our contemporary polity. This is not simply an academic exercise, for Baptist principles need not only to be proved but practised.

Increasingly, commentators have seen Baptists in these forty years as sitting between ecumenical Christendom and evangelical sectarianism.(1) It is not in fact a bad strategic position to occupy though involving very considerable pressures on denominational leadership to ensure that a proper balance of positive affirmation is secured: in polity, an order both congregational and associative; in ministry, both the vocation of the whole people of God and the separated ministry of word and sacrament; in worship, a liturgy at once structured but free; and in mission, a commitment to both evangelism and prophetic action.

The establishment of the Congregational Church in 1966 by most churches of the former Congregational Union left Baptists as the only major historical denomination making the local church, gathered together at the call of Christ, its starting-point for the definition of the church and of the authority structures of that church (though starting-points do not embrace the totality of definitions). Dr West himself has indicated how such a theology of the church relates to the theology of believer's baptism: 'It may be argued that those who practise infant baptism and those who practise believer's baptism start from different models of the Church. Those practising infant baptism see the Church as an ontologically given community into which a child is incorporated, whereas Baptists and those practising

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believer's baptism view the Church as a community which is constituted by the activity of God on the individual who responds consciously and believes and so becomes a participating member of the community.'(2) The ecclesiological significance of baptism has also been stressed by such Baptist authors as Neville Clark, George Beasley-Murray and R. E. O. White, who called Baptists to a more careful and thoughtful baptismal discipline, underlining the corporate significance of the sacrament, and its witness to the givenness of grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as over against a more subjective emphasis on the believer's baptismal vow. A biblical theology rich with liturgical significance had been attractively expounded but the impact upon the constituency was less than it deserved.

Within Baptist church structures, the associations and the Union have only such powers as are covenanted to them by the member churches. It is not so much that they lack power, as that the source of that power is in the consent and missionary vision of the local church. This has profound practical consequences for the relationships between the Union and its member churches, especially when their membership, new to Baptist church life, is unschooled in Baptist principles. The vulnerability of the Union to theological disaffection is apparent, as for example in the Christological dispute of 1971, in the questioning of the Union's membership of the World Council of Churches, and more recently in the emergence of new authority structures in those churches which accept the full thrust of restorationism.

For all this, it can be contended that the Union is organizationally stronger today than it was in the past. The concept of an accredited ministry is widely accepted, provision for that ministry secures widespread support, the agency of the Home Mission Fund for the missionary task of the church at home is well recognized, whilst it is surely rare today for a minister to boast that his settlements have been unaided by the superintendents. Indeed the growth in the acceptance of the ministry of the superintendents is a fundamental fact of Baptist history in the twentieth century, when so many other influences have tended towards the disintegration of the common denominational life.

Intrinsic to the 'gathered church' is the idea that the believers are so gathered not merely for their own sake but for service to the gospel and the world. Accordingly all members are committed to be active agents of the church's missionary task. In fact, a large number of smaller churches throughout this period have been dependent for regular ministry on laymen rather than ordained ministers. In addition, the advent of team ministry has led in many local situations to a blend of ministry (often under the title of eldership) embracing both lay and ordained members. Theology needs to be clarified to secure a practice which both affirms the vocation of all believers and recognises the ministry of word and sacrament as one of God's gifts to his church.

One of the signs of growing confidence in the denomination has

been the increased number of candidates applying for training for admission to the Baptist ministry. Following initiatives taken by the Northern College, other colleges have also experimented with patterns of training which are congregation-based. These, reflecting newer insights into ministerial training in many other parts of the world, put more emphasis upon the practical aspects of training and upon learning through theological reflection on particular pastoral situations. Academic theological education, crucial as it is, can never be the whole of ministerial training. Denominational leadership, the work of the colleges and the need to underpin life and service with theological insight will all continue to require the finest scholars we can produce. But an élitist ministry, distanced from the culture of the people, would be difficult to defend, and Baptists of all people ought to appreciate the arguments for a locally-trained leadership as biblical. Such training also reflects a difference in the perception of the ministerial task: no longer is the minister seen as essentially a pulpit orator, proverbially six foot above contradiction: much more attention is now given to a fuller range of pastoral gifts embracing leadership, guidance, comfort and counsel, such as the strains of modern life require.

A separated ministry, properly trained in biblical and theological scholarship, is particularly important for Baptists, since in the past they have shown themselves prone to pragmatism and easy seduction by the anticipation of short-term success. Reflecting on the Evangelical Calvinism that undergirded Baptist response to the new urban-industrial world of the early nineteenth century, Dr Champion argued in 1979, 'Proper structures of church life derive from a coherent theology ... Consequently I believe that if as a denomination we are to fashion new structures of church-life as an effective means of communicating the gospel and sustaining both faith and fellowship amid the radical changes occurring in contemporary society we need a clearer, more coherent and widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present.'(3) Notwithstanding this plea, experience and experiment still tend to run ahead of theology.

Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the conduct of public worship. In the immediate post-war years, almost without exception, Baptist churches would, save for an occasional ministerial gloss from Moffatt (or their own Baptist Weymouth), have read the scriptures from the Authorised Version. Today, save for an almost complete rejection of that version, the picture would be one of wide divergence. Again it might be said that although not tied to a Book of Common Prayer, in practice the denomination's worship was largely shaped by the use of a 'Book of Common Hymnody', which nurtured faith and devotion with a rich diet of evangelical spirituality. The sources of hymnody today are much more diverse, and even if properly contemporary, popular and praise-orientated, exhibit all too often much of that sentimentalism, introspection, and emotionalism that has ever been the pathology of Free-church hymnody. Taken as a whole it is doubtful whether the new hymnody would constitute what Wesley claimed for his collection of hymns, that it afforded 'a little body of experimental and practical divinity',(4) a sure source of nurture both for congregations and

individual Christians. More worrying than this, however, has been the development of patterns of worship that omit major elements of the reformed liturgy in favour of unstructured immediacy.

Only in the most general way can the liturgical movement have been said to have affected Baptist churches. Whilst writers such as Stephen Winward and Neville Clark have ably demonstrated the ways in which liturgical renewal could enrich Baptist worship, they have not been widely influential, though Winward and Payne's *Orders and Prayers for Christian Worship* has been considered the most 'liturgically advanced directory of worship' of any of the Free Churches with its happy blend of Free-church flexibility with traditional liturgical structure.(5) But there have been changes; no longer, for the most part, is communion celebrated as a kind of liturgical appendix to the main diet of worship whereas in the 1950s that was still common. In like fashion, infant dedication (without too many scruples over that use of language) would not now be treated as a separate rite but would be incorporated within the main structure of morning worship. At a lower level of significance, distinctive clerical dress has become less common among Baptist ministers, whilst the sharing of lay people in the conduct of worship has become more common, though the world in which they live is not always as much the subject of prayerful concern as scriptural injunction demands.

Within their heritage Baptists discern within the one mission of the church a double commitment to both evangelism and a concern for 'justice, peace and the integrity of creation'. Dr West argues that evangelism as a separate item should always appear on the agenda of the church meeting: 'if this item is not on the agenda, then how can the Holy Spirit have His chance to reveal Christ's purpose?'(6) Baptists, generally supportive of campaign evangelism, especially that led by Billy Graham, a fellow Baptist, benefited by the admission of Graham converts into their membership. But increasingly campaign evangelism was seen as second best, since evangelism was properly the inalienable task of the local church, patiently and persistently undertaken within its own community.

Within the denomination there has been debate as to the appropriateness of the specific strategies of the Church Growth Movement. Certain tools of analysis have been helpful, as was the concentration on discipleship rather than decision-making. Sometimes, however, the movement seemed enslaved within its own jargon, and despite disavowals, to be over-concerned with numbers. In particular, the 'homogeneous growth' principle has been widely questioned in this country, even by those otherwise supportive of the movement, as denying a gospel of reconciliation that over-rides both ethnic and class divisions. Nor has the movement, for all its emphasis upon context, always been realistic about what is possible in a given situation, or sympathetic to the pain and cost of certain types of Christian witness.

The late twentieth century has not lacked large issues of social responsibility: the stock-piling of nuclear weapons, South Africa and

Central America, sexual permissiveness and the instability of so many marriages, the polarisation of wealth and poverty, to name but a few. Vigilance in all such issues, in programmes of both action and education, has been a constant and patient concern of many within the denomination. When, however, in 1978 E. R. Norman used his Reith Lectures to attack the World Council of Churches for 'politicizing' the church, a number of Baptist voices were raised in support of his position. It is probably symbolic that whereas in 1906 there were seventeen Baptist M.P.s (fifteen Liberal and two Labour), since 1983 there have been only two, both conservatives.(7) Certainly Baptist political affections have become more volatile than the almost total alliance with the Liberals at the beginning of the century. At the same time evangelicalism has become less pietistic: David Sheppard led the way in East London, in 1974 the Lausanne Conference underwrote a both/and approach to evangelism and social responsibility, whilst TEAR Fund allowed the Evangelical constituency, including many Baptists, no excuse for opting out of relief and development in the Third World. Particularly important for Baptists were the writings of several American Mennonites such as John Yoder, Ronald Sider, and Jim Wallis who defined the Biblical basis for radical discipleship.

All this serves to underline the double affirmations that Baptists have found themselves making in this period. Baptists, particularly in Britain, feel the double pull of ecumenical and evangelical demands, in many respects providing a bridge between those allegiances. Within the world family of Baptists, the unwillingness of many conventions and unions to be directly involved ecumenically makes it difficult for those who do so engage to be taken as seriously as they ought, for unlike other world denominational groupings, their ecumenical presence is only a fragment of their world confessional strength. Accordingly Baptist strength on the staff of the World Council (currently only two) is pitifully small, whilst membership of committees and commissions is limited. Even conventions and unions committed to ecumenical participation may seem over-cautious in ecumenical experimentation, constrained by the reluctance and conservatism of their member churches. For British Baptists since 1948, however, that has proved a creative, if not always an easy, tension.

NOTES

1 A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920-85*, 1986, pp.458, 552, 621. *Prospect of the Eighties,* introduced by P. Brierley, Bible Society, 1979, pp.12-14.
2 W. M. S. West, 'Towards a Consensus on Baptism? Louisville 1979', *Baptist Quarterly,* January 1980, p.227.
3 L. G. Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', *Ibid.*, p.206.
4 *Wesley's Hymns,* 1779, Preface.
5 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England,* Vol.V, 1965, p.47.
6 W. M. S. West, *Baptist Principles,* 1967 edition, p.17.
7 D. Bebbington, 'Baptist Members of Parliament in the Twentieth Century', *Baptist Quarterly,* April 1986, p.255.

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