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WHITHER THE BAPTISTS?

Dr Russell, as secretary of the Baptist Union, presented to the Assembly in 1981 a document entitled **Call to Commitment**. One of the six main sections was 'A commitment to learn' which gave special mention to the need 'to rediscover the message of the Bible for the days in which we are living', the need 'to know what it means to be a Baptist Christian today' and to the need 'to know the meaning of the Gospel of the Kingdom within the context of present day society'. In order to give practical effect to this emphasis on learning various activities were mentioned through which people in our churches would be helped to understand the Baptist heritage and identity, a task whose urgency is still being underlined. In the same year a group of five ministers issued a booklet with the title **Call to Mind**, followed in 1985 with a larger book exploring the covenant basis of Baptist life and mission under the title **Bound to Love**, which offers a further 'invitation to Baptists to call to mind certain dimensions of Christian understanding and historic Baptist conviction in the search for a coherent theology upon which to fashion new structures of church life and mission today'. A commendation of the book calls it 'another plea for theological integrity and foundations'. The purpose of this article is to take a close look at this emphasis and to point out some of its implications. Many changes are occurring among us and it is vitally important that these changes should be guided and developed in a manner consistent with the wholeness of the Gospel. Traditional theological emphases may not be adequate for the situation in which we find ourselves, which rather calls for a prolonged process of careful thought, leading to fresh theological formulations indicating the directions which the denomination should take in the future and the patterns which should control its organisation and activities.

Four trends are in my judgment of considerable significance, here:

(i) A more lively spirit has been in evidence in the denomination, marked by fresh confidence in the Christian gospel as expressed in the Baptist position. The response to the changes and challenges presented by the contemporary situation is more positive than it was some time ago. There is a sense of optimism born out of an awareness that God is at work among us and through us.

(ii) This fresh spirit has created among us a readier willingness to accept one another in all our diversity of personality. Amid the different responses and attitudes to the changing situation in which we are all involved, a mutual acceptance arising out of a growing realisation of our oneness in Christ who accepts and uses different people in different ways, has emerged.

(iii) In common with all sections of the Christian church, Baptists are experiencing changes in patterns of worship, in church structures and activities and in relations with other denominations. What is now significant is that these changes are not necessarily allowed to cause dissension and disruption; rather they are seen as opportunities for experiments in Christian witness and communication.

(iv) Most members of our churches would accept the position that the wholeness of the Gospel is greater than the Baptist interpretation of it, and so try to develop an openness of mind and spirit towards the

experiences and emphases of other Christian communities engaging in such activities and enterprises which further such reconciling relationships.

With these positive trends in contemporary Baptist church life are associated other elements of a different character:

(i) The willingness to change may bring a sense of freshness and relevance, but it may also spring from a superficial acceptance of contemporary social fashions. Then lacking Christian discernment, it no longer expresses the Gospel, belonging rather to the characteristics of a secular age.

(ii) The diversity of experiment which possesses a potential for enrichment has also been the source of conflict leading to the formation of competing groupings, to a spirit of rivalry and so to dissensions. Amid such confusion churches lose sight of the real nature of the Gospel and the eternal purpose of the Christian faith.

(iii) The whole process of the many changes in the contemporary situation can be a short-term affair, for in another generation there may appear further changes of a different kind. Here a personal word may be allowed. During a long life within the Baptist community I have seen many changes and many experiments. Some have been advocated as almost the ultimate answer to certain human situations, yet now they belong simply to the records of history. Too full an involvement in the present situation can cause us to lose sight of the basic and unchanging nature of the Gospel.

To what conclusions does this brief and very limited examination of present trends, both positive and negative, lead us? What is necessary for the positive and encouraging features to be strengthened? How may the inherent dangers be avoided or overcome? In my judgment one task appears to be increasingly important. I believe that the situation requires a more adequate and thorough-going exploration and exposition of the theological foundation of the Baptist position, as a means of discernment so that true and wise judgments can be made. It would indicate the spiritual purpose of our life together so that we could see more clearly the direction we are to pursue. It would reveal the rich resources of our faith and help us to understand how they are to be used and shared with others.

The emphasis made in the preceding paragraphs may now be placed in a larger setting for I believe that the history of the whole Christian church demonstrates that a theological foundation though not a set of rigid dogmas, is essential for any Christian movement to be sustained as a living entity through the centuries. The foundation is Christ and the facts and affirmations about Christ given in the witness of the apostles, though these require continuing theological interpretation as the faith has to be lived and communicated in different ages and cultures. Where this task is not faithfully fulfilled a Christian movement or community loses direction and purpose, and dissipates its energies in superficial enterprises. So I believe that such a theological foundation is one of the elements essential for a living and continuing Christian community, as can be demonstrated from our own history.

(i) In the seventeenth century Baptists belonged to the movement of dissent from the established church in which the autonomy of the congregation of believers was accepted as the fundamental unit of church life. Baptists of course were marked out from the other dissenting groups by the practice of believers' baptism, derived from

an acceptance of the unique and supreme authority of Scripture as the Word of God, usually literally understood and interpreted. Bunyan's account of his spiritual experiences in **Grace Abounding to the chief of sinners** illustrates this acceptance of Scripture as a guide for the interpretation of personal happenings. The **Broadmead Records** offer a similar illustration in regard to the life of a church. Thus this view of the nature and authority of Scripture becomes the theological foundation upon which the structures of Baptist church life in the seventeenth century were erected.

(ii) The formation of the Baptist Missionary Society at the end of the eighteenth century and its development during the nineteenth century marks another important period in Baptist history. The main source both for its beginning and for its continuation was the evangelical interpretation of Calvinism propagated by Andrew Fuller, John Ryland and others. This was the theological root out of which grew the new sense of obligation for world-wide mission and this root sustained the vigorous growth which followed in many practical outworkings.

(iii) The third significant period may be discerned in the later part of the nineteenth century, a period during which many new and large chapels were built. Worship was characterised by the centrality of the pulpit as a place of authority, of inspiration and of instruction, as exemplified in the work of outstanding preachers like Spurgeon, Clifford and McLaren as well as of many preachers of lesser note who still attracted large congregations and exercised much influence in their localities. Worship was understood as the response of the gathered congregation to the Word of God mediated through the preacher inspired by the Holy Spirit. Here was the theological basis justifying the centrality and authority of preaching.

These illustrations from Baptist history substantiate the general position that a firm theological foundation is essential for the maintenance of a Christian movement as a living entity through the changes of successive generations. The emphases made in the past and the structures created under their influence remain with us and still constitute much of our church life, but the contemporary situation is calling in question the relevance of the theological foundation of those emphases. This means that it has become necessary once more to make a more careful examination of those foundations in order to discover what fresh theological formulations may be needed to give direction and purpose to church life, in our environment of change.

Four areas of debate immediately suggest themselves:

(i) An acceptance of the unique authority of Scripture has been the foundation of the Baptist position but a hundred years of biblical scholarship compel us to rethink the nature of biblical authority. Linked with this are questions about the work of the Spirit which have been given a quite inadequate place in Baptist thinking. The work of the Spirit is evident not only in the inspiration of the biblical writings but also in the traditions manifest in the ongoing life of the various parts of the Christian church. The present emphasis upon the power and activity of the Spirit due in large measure to the influence of the charismatic movement may then raise larger questions for us than those associated merely with new and exciting features in worship. Questions about the authority of Scripture and the work of the Spirit must cause us to reflect upon the extent to which we can maintain the patterns of church life whether to the point of suggesting changes in the views about the nature and structure of the

church or to substantiate the traditional patterns in new ways. Whatever the results may be, the questions must not be evaded.

(ii) During the twentieth century the relationships between the churches in Britain have radically changed and without doubt will continue to change. The word dissenter in its seventeenth-century usage is hardly in use today. The later word nonconformist no longer expresses a meaningful position. The term Free Church is vague. Have we still a theological basis for a dissenting position? Or have the changing relationships between the denominations brought a mutual, even if limited, recognition of one another so that we understand more clearly and appreciate more positively the different insights and emphases of other denominations: have we in this way been brought to a larger comprehension of the wholeness of the Gospel? Certainly any honest attempt to place our changing ecclesiastical relationships in the light of the wholeness of the Gospel must cause us to reflect upon our theological foundations.

(iii) The obligation for universal mission so strongly stressed in the formation of the B.M.S. is still accepted by Baptists. But aspects of the human situation which were not so apparent in former generations have become all too clear in recent decades and now occupy a large place in Christian minds and consciences. During this century the views of many Christians about non-Christian faiths have altered. There has grown up a respect for other faiths, born out of a more sensitive understanding of their spirituality, of the doctrines upon which that spirituality is based and of the practices by which it is sustained. There is now both an openness for dialogue and a growing willingness to share together in concerns for the good of humanity. Modern systems of communication have brought to everyone, often in a particularly vivid and dramatic manner, a knowledge of the needs of other peoples, of poverty, of famine, of conflict creating awareness of political and social conditions as causes of human deprivation and misery. This has evoked a concern for the physical well-being of people placing a powerful emphasis upon a caring ministry as an obligation upon Christians, as a proper part of Christian mission.

(iv) Preaching still occupies an important place among us and is still central in much Baptist worship. But in the contemporary situation the spoken and written word as a means of communication is being challenged by the use of other media; consequently questions arise about the centrality of the word and preacher in our worship. Different modes of expressing the faith are in common use with congregations often more actively involved in the worship. This situation calls for a clearer understanding of the nature of worship and its place in the totality of our understanding of the purpose of God and what He requires from us.

One final question has still to be raised. It concerns the nature of the theological thinking which we need. What kind of approach will provide for our churches guidelines for the shaping of structures and activities which will be effective in the fulfilment of the church's mission in the world? Some theological thinking takes place in academic circles leading to the publication of scholarly books and articles. Much of this is challenging, much is valuable. We need scholars who will be familiar with this process and its conclusions, but the theological thinking which is pursued in uncommitted academic circles is not always suited to the guidance of church life. Some theological thinking is conducted within the

context of well-defined ecclesiastical dogmas. It seeks to defend dogmas from attack or to explicate them in order to strengthen faith. But the context of Baptist thinking is the whole Scripture and not abstracted ecclesiastical dogma.

The kind of theological thinking, which our situation requires, will arise out of the revelation of God in Christ made real to successive generations by the activity of the Spirit through Scripture and in the life of the whole Christian church. It must be rooted both in the personal experience of the individual thinker and writer, and in the experience of the Christian community of which he or she is a member. Such thinking needs to be galvanized by an inner compulsion to formulate in theological terms the nature and significance of that experience for the sake of communicating the faith.

In his busy life Dr Russell has shown that it is possible to continue scholarly work in his books on the inter-testamental period with active participation in the life of the churches through his service as secretary to the Baptist Union as well as his work in the European Baptist Federation. Have we among us one or more persons well equipped theologically and committed to an active sharing in the life of the denomination who in the coming years will feel led to undertake the task which I have here set out? It would offer a service which could be of incalculable value to Baptists everywhere. It would help us to understand how the divine purpose for our churches should be worked out in succeeding generations and the understanding would be a call to obedience.

Who will fulfil this task?

L.G. CHAMPION