

## **Editorial**

# **TOO MANY MINISTERS?**

The official Baptist system for appointing staff in local churches is struggling. No matter how hard the superintendents work to keep up, the demands are intensifying. Churches and ministers are expressing increasing concern at how slowly and inefficiently the official system moves.

Several factors contribute to this log jam:

- i) The supply of potential ministers exceeds present demand in existing churches.
- ii) A number of growing churches are making internal appointments rather than adding a second or third minister.
- iii) Many churches are setting an upper age limit for candidates. This leaves many older ministers, trained in the pre-renewal days of one man ministry, facing the prospect of a forced early retirement.

It's clear that a crisis is coming to a head. The BU Council is seeking to restrict the intake of students at our colleges. More churches are speaking of bypassing the official system altogether.

The time has surely come to de-regulate and decentralise the appointment of ministers. Churches should be encouraged to seek new staff by any appropriate means, using the superintendents as advisers rather than the sole official conduit for potential staff. The ban on advertising for ministers in the Baptist Times should be abolished forthwith, as should any other such restrictive practices. Churches should be free to draw up a shortlist of applicants, from whom one name goes forward to the church meeting following a day of interviews. When a pedestrian system is slowing to snail's pace it's time for a radical overhaul.

If Superintendents could be freed from the time sapping rigours of ministerial appointments, they could take a key role in an urgent task. Many older ministers need retraining, in order to have the priorities and expertise looked for by today's churches. It's no good simply complaining that the churches have a bias to young leadership. Let's develop an effective retraining programme, so that the pastoral wisdom of older ministers can become a resource in demand again, maybe not in sole pastoral charge, but as an older specialist within a team.

This approach maximises the qualities of those older ministers who are prepared to adapt to today's church. Those who refuse to adapt from a one man band style and those who have a liberal theology cannot be helped: candidly their job prospects will be better in one of the more traditional denominations where there's a shortage of ministers.

The attempt to restrict the intake of new ministers shows a failure to grasp the market of church life today. If these men and women are called of God, they will enter a Bible college and then lead local churches, but their ministry will not be linked to the Baptist Union. If Baptist churches are unable to find the younger ministers they want, due to the BU Council's restrictive practice, the members of such churches will gradually drift away to other lively evangelical fellowships where the kind of leadership they desire is provided. If you cut off the supply of appropriate ministers, you end up losing members or even whole congregations across the nation.

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## **NEWSLETTER No. 47 - MARCH, 1993**

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The Mainstream Newsletter is designed to encourage life and growth among churches within the Baptist Union. On the understanding that contributors are in sympathy with this aim, they have full liberty of expression. Views contained in the newsletter are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Mainstream executive.

**What of the new ministers?** For too long the colleges have tended to shunt students into initial pastorates in long established Baptist causes. Responsible leadership and proper management of resources requires a much more precise assessment of leaders. More of our new ministers with pioneering temperaments and skills should be sent out to plant new churches, and told they would be a square peg in a round hole if they went to an established cause.

**Are there too many ministers?** There are too many to maintain the status quo. There are too many for the present Home Mission system to be adequate. A growing number may need to explore self-financing through other part time work and local funding initiatives. And a good number are in need of mid-life retraining.

But there's another dimension to these issues if we're serious about church growth and church planting. You see, if I could find a way of raising the money, I would put six ministers to work tomorrow, planting new satellite congregations around Herne Hill. And there are many other churches just as ready to see a massive advance for the good news in this generation.

To me this is no time for battening down the hatches. It's a time to pray for more workers to be sent out into the

harvest! Fresh opportunities invariably require fresh thinking. And fresh advances for the Gospel invariably require demanding steps of faith.

This raises a further issue. In this decade of evangelism, when many of us are taking new church planting initiatives, we rejoice in the fact that more men and women are coming forward for full time ministry. But at the same time the BU Council has failed to set a church planting goal and now restricts the number who can be trained.

**Is this the kind of leadership we expect? Is the BU Council dogged by those very qualities that make it difficult for older ministers to secure new churches?** I have written to David Coffey today to ask for the age, gender and race distribution of the Council. I would like to see a significant proportion of places set aside for women and for those under 40. I would like to see a maximum term of service of ten years, followed by a minimum break of two years. Life membership and honorary membership should be abolished forthwith. All members should retire at 65. This regrettable lack of vision by the Council raises a fundamental question: **Is the BU Council well past its sell by date?**

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## ORDINATION: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

In a recent article of the Baptist Quarterly ("75 Years of the General Superintendency - what next?", BQ XXXIV, Jan 1992, pp229-239) Geoffrey Reynolds questioned whether the present practice among English Baptists is correct, "in which ordination is generally entrusted to a member of staff of the college where the ordinand has been a student, for it seems to put undue emphasis on academic study and pastoral training, whereas the most important element must be the recognition of the call". Citing the Baptist Union Report on The Meaning and Practice of Ordination among Baptists, in which ordination is defined as "the act, wherein the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, publicly recognises and confirms that a Christian believer has been gifted, called and set apart by God for the work of the ministry and in the name of Christ commissions him for this work", Geoffrey Reynolds argues that the act of ordination should be entrusted to "an official representative of 'the Church' - the sending church, the calling church or the wider fellowship of churches in Association or Union". Perhaps not surprisingly, as one of the General Superintendents of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the conclusion is then drawn that "the most appropriate person would seem to be the one entrusted with 'episkope' for the new minister". However, drawing upon my experience as principal of one of our Baptist theological colleges, I wish to question this conclusion!

In ordination a number of agencies come together to recognise the call of God and to pray

God's blessing on the ordinand. In present practice three agencies in particular are normally represented: the sending church, who in the first place discerned the call of God and commended the ordinand for training; the calling church, who in issuing an invitation to the ordinand to be their pastor confirmed the original call; and the college, who not only offered training, but also throughout the period of training continued to test that original call.

In so far as ordination involves recognition by the church as a whole, and not by church leaders alone, no individual office-holders are actually necessary to ordination. For example, it does not require an ordained person to preside; nor need the sending church be represented by its pastor, nor the college by its principal. Indeed, there is no reason why in principle any ordained person should have to take part. On the other hand, those taking part need to be credible and accredited representatives of the bodies they represent.

Ordination, however, as Geoffrey Reynolds rightly recognises, involves the wider church. Indeed, in essence ordination is recognition by the wider church of God's call to an individual to leadership among his people (the assertion in Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship that ordination gives public recognition to a person's call from God "to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament" is, as I have argued elsewhere, foreign to a New Testament understanding of ministry, and is in fact simply a Reformed variant on the Roman

Catholic doctrine of the priesthood). Hence the necessity for the wider church to be represented. In this connection there is much to be said for inviting a representative of the Association Ministerial Recognition Committee, which in the context of the Baptist Union of Great Britain is involved in testing the call and commending the person to an appropriate Baptist college. If there is need for the wider union of churches to be represented, as I also believe to be the case, then there is no reason why the Baptist union may not be represented by the college - for in practical terms at least, not only does the Baptist Union of Great Britain give its member colleges authority to accept and train ordinands on its behalf, it also gives the colleges responsibility to determine whether or not at the end of the period of training the ordinand is competent for nationally recognised ministry within the Baptist denomination. In this latter respect, Geoffrey Reynolds has certainly not been fair in his assessment of the work of the colleges: the colleges are not just engaged in academic and pastoral training, but are also continually testing the call of their students. The fact that college principals and their staff are not paid servants of the Baptist Union does not mean that they may be any less representative of the Union. Indeed, the fact that college principals are ex-officio members of the Baptist Union Council surely indicates that they are very much central to the life and

work of the Baptist Union. Furthermore, in view of the increasing tendency for General Superintendents to regard themselves as equivalent to Anglican bishops, there is perhaps a strong reason for refusing to encourage ordination to become the prerogative of the Superintendent, lest we give others the impression that we too believe episcopacy to be one of the essential marks of the church.

Yet whether the Superintendent or the college staff member be the representative of the Baptist Union, it is important that as Baptists we continue to insist that in the final analysis ordination is in the hands of the church, and not in the hands of the individual presiding over the act of ordination. Opportunity should therefore always be given to people other than the Superintendent or college staff member to pray God's blessing upon the ordinand and seek a fresh empowering and filling of the Holy Spirit - otherwise there is the danger that ordination is seen as a priestly activity rather than a church activity. Normally these prayers will be taken by those actually laying hands upon the ordinand, but there is no reason why members of the congregation could not offer prayer for and words of encouragement to the ordinand. In this way ordination can indeed become an act of the churches, rather than an act "entrusted.....to an official representative of 'the Church'".

Paul Beasley-Murray

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## WHERE ARE BAPTISTS GOING?

**Stephen Ibbotson**

Here is an article in which I am going to speak out of turn. My thoughts are only half-formed; some may say half-baked! Yet I will venture to solidify them a bit more by this very process of writing. Usually I am polite and political, or so I would like to think, maintaining these thoughts at a semi-conscious level, where they burst into occasional, conscious expressions of frustration. Normally, as a good boy, I play the denominational game, sitting on committees doing my bit, quietly wondering at times whether it is all worth it. These reflections come from a perspective of a loyal person within the denomination, who sits at times critically, uneasily and even frustratedly within it.

Let me state at the outset that I have appreciated the developments within our denomination that have taken place recently. The movement taking place is in the right direction, but I cannot help but feel a growing sense of doubt as to whether we are biting on the real issues of the moment. I am unsure as to whether the relevance gap between denominational/associational structures on the one hand, and the leadership repre-

senting the growing edge of our denomination on the other, is as yet fully recognised. There is much within the Ten Year Plan - Towards 2000 with which I personally identify and applaud. However in both its content and style I sense that it may not be scratching where the average church leader, let alone member, is in fact itching. It is neither an agenda to set them alight, nor one with which they will readily be able to identify. There is a communication issue here. The statement of intent hardly trips off the tongue. It is embracing of all visions and has all the appearance of being drafted by committees that have bent over backwards to be all inclusive. This is an admirable quality, but I think it may have been at the expense of its ability to connect with, let alone fire, key leaders in our churches, who remain aloof to and even suspicious of denominational affairs. In short it may be fine for those already convinced of the denominational thing, but I am beginning to question whether it is an adequate statement of direction for our denomination.

However, beside the issue of presentation and

communication, there are deeper issues that we need to explore. Three of the statements of intent scratch issues where insufficient of our membership are itching; namely Baptist identity, associating and sharing resources. Now I am certain that the Ten Year Plan is a fair reflection of the listening-day process. People who came to these days expressed what they saw as the issues of the moment. The problem was, however, that the people who came to those days were probably those already converted to the ideas of Baptist identity, associating and sharing resources. However, there were many more, who because of years of peering across the relevance divide, were not there, were not therefore heard, and who if pressed would not recognise identity, associating or sharing of resources as the current issues.

This is where I am coming towards the heart of my tentative reflections. The group of people which I have identified (and I know that they are there because I've heard them talking for 17 years in church life and amongst church leaders) are part of the general decline of denominational consciousness. And as a real "Jeremiah" I hazard a guess that this decline of denominational consciousness is impossible to arrest as no amount of hemming up by national leadership will stop the fraying at the edges. We are witnessing an ecclesiastical expression of a profound sociological movement in which the reasons for loyalty to institutions are undergoing a transformation. The reasons for this are numerous. Let me rehearse a few.

First, Christians are, generally speaking, no longer interested in laying down demarcation lines as a way of securing their own identity and territory. Rather there is a desire to discern a mutual recognition of gifts and inheritance which one another's tradition affords, and so discover a richer whole, as a means of achieving a more effective hearing for the gospel in our society.

Second, we live in a society and time when relationships are determined less by traditional loyalty to "the tribe" or institution, and more by the very act of relating within a shared cultural identity. So Christians increasingly relate locally (horizontally) according to a broad stream of cultural identification, rather than by the traditional identity of the national denomination (vertically). The pan-church charismatic movement, with its accompanying worship style and other emphases, has done much to further erode traditional loyalties which were already pressed by the growth of pan-evangelicalism. The students of the burgeoning Christian Unions and other non-denominational student movements, are now beginning to take responsibilities within the structures. To understand the mood of today's rising leadership, you have to look at what happened in the universities in the sixties, seventies and early eighties. There they went to the "student" church irrespective of its denomination, and they were

nurtured in an environment where denominational identity was a non-issue. What's more it was probably the most exciting time of their christian life. Talk of denominational "family" was a foreign language to them then, and probably remains so to this day. Together with the growth of Spring Harvest, para-denominational magazines, these have all added to this steadily growing erosion. We had better live with the reality that people attend a church not because it is Baptist, Anglican or new church, but because it has an ethos and philosophy of ministry with which they identify and which meets their personal needs. This can be described as consumerism entering Church life, but I believe such structures show just how misplaced and ill-informed those criticisms are.

Finally, we need to see that this very process is part of what the Spirit is giving us during these days, rather than wringing our hands in anguish on the sidelines, and bemoaning how people do not understand our tradition, and have no loyalty to its structures. Rather than being afraid of this process and critical of it, we need to cultivate an attitude which appreciates that the Spirit is working in this movement of profound social change of distancing from traditional institutions. This last point needs further development if I am not to be totally misunderstood!

We have to recognise that the issues which make up the bundle of views which we now call Baptist identity, were fashioned in a totally different historical and ecclesiastical context. Unless we recognise the difference between those days and our own, we will tend to express the issues of identity in a totally inappropriate manner. What I mean is that our forefathers had to fashion the Kingdom-truth issues against the backdrop of a Christendom culture. It was crucially important to stand up for a believers' church, from which the baptism of believers flowed, and the freedom of conscience in matters of religion, and hence the non-interference of the state. They were to be a church gathered by the Lord and seeking to walk in all the Lord's ways. These were and are Kingdom-truth issues, and they became the Baptist position. However, today these are not the arguments that need to be rehearsed, nor the battle that needs to be won. Our forefathers heroically fought for these things over against an understanding of Church borne of the legacy of Constantine and the godly prince. Such views were not very popular with the establishment, and so, as with any minority or persecuted group, the reasons for gathering together in association were very strong. There was a clear agenda before them which arose out of the radical concern to be a church that was authentic and New Testament. When the heat of persecution was over, then the opportunity to spread their dream of the church gave further impetus to relational unity. In and after persecution they were motivated by a dream.

Today that backdrop which fashioned Baptist identity and relationship has gone forever. The

argument for a believers' church is won, as the total Christian community faces up the same reality that we are a minority church, disestablished sociologically. Today the task is to be a missionary church. The dream is nothing less than the re-evangelisation of the UK. That is our dream as a network of churches. Baptist identity can only be truly Christian identity if we work out what it means to be radically Christian in our secularised society. Baptist identity can only be established for us today if it is worked out from two horizons: the horizon of our past roots that shape who we are today, and the **horizon of our calling to be genuine Christians today and tomorrow**. If we work from only one horizon, or if we set the horizon incorrectly by living by a false or irrelevant agenda then our notion of Baptist identity and association, although pure and pristine by historical standards, will be badly skewed. In this case it will not reflect the Kingdom but it will become a pharisaical exercise to spotting the "sinner", the one who has departed from the Baptist faith once delivered! How shocking! Baptist identity and Baptist associating has to be worked out anew in each generation not as an historical exercise (although historical tools will be used in the task), but as a response to our calling to be Kingdom people in this generation. If the horizon against which we operate is the calling to re-evangelise our country then this will shape and order our agenda and our goals. Every goal and all our agendas will be filtered through this calling, this dream.

All this leads me to this conclusion. The issues we face as a group of churches is not so much defining our Baptist identity in conversation with our past. Rather it is a matter of defining our christian identity as baptist churches in conversation with our fellow believers and fellow travellers in the task of being a servant, missioning church. The reason I say this is that such a dream of the re-evangelisation of the UK is impossible for us to achieve as a denomination alone. The dream forces us to think beyond ourselves and to see ways in which God has given us fellow pilgrims along this daunting pathway. As time goes on I genuinely wonder whether there is a question of baptist identity and associating to be considered. Members are quite secure in their belief in a believers' church under the Lordship of Christ. The question of our identity is posed not only against the backdrop of the new churches and the ecumenical movement, but also with the cold wind of decline in denominational allegiance blowing around our skirts. Is it posed with the aim of securing denominational allegiance, trying to gather people on board a bandwagon that has got stuck in the mud of modern secularism? Is it really a crisis of Baptist identity or of Baptist cohesion?

The issue is further highlighted by what I see as a very important shift in the manner of God's working in the Church. Every major recent movement and development of the Spirit has taken place not out of one denomination, but across denominations

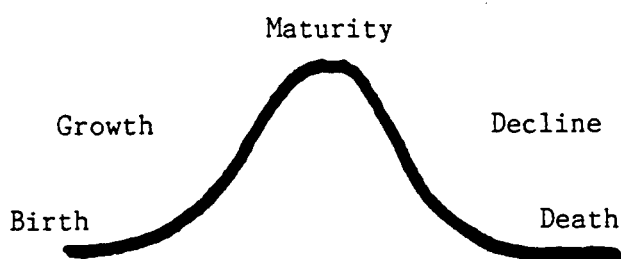
and the churches. At one time it was movements of the God's Spirit that developed into what we now call the mainline denominations. The denominations actually expressed and carried significant Kingdom developments: the presbyterians and their concern for the Church's purity, the Independents and their concern to be the gathered Church under the Lordship of Christ, the Baptist with all the above plus its expression in believers' baptism, the Methodists and their desire for regeneration and holiness, the Salvation Army's commitment to holistic mission amongst the marginalised of their day and the Pentecostals' commitment to charismatic Christian living. They were all bearers of different facets of Kingdom truth. Comparatively speaking the prophetic voice has been silent within the denominations as movements for decades. But God has not been silent. Every significant call of the Spirit to the churches has come from cross-denominational movements e.g. ecumenism, Lausanne, the charismatic movement and church planting. The Spirit is speaking horizontally and not vertically. What is more the ideas and movements that arise do not have legs, they are turbo-charged! What is the Spirit saying in this? Is he asking us to think the unthinkable? Is he calling us not to take our identities **too** seriously (emphasis important)? May he even be asking denominations and groupings to realise their highly provisional character as we hasten towards the time of the Kingdom being consummated when the bride will be readied for the groom by a Spirit inspired "facial"? Is there something in our Scriptures about grains of wheat falling into the ground and dying? I think I've heard something like that! Might it have application to our structures at some point in the future? Should it be ready for that future? Might this not be what it means to read the signs of the times? However in contrast to these questions may we be giving the impression of being the **most** denominationally minded and proud of our Baptist identity as we project the issues to a self-conscious process of reflection and debate?

So back to our agenda for this decade. What is the nature of that agenda? Are they true aims or an analysis of our effectiveness? Are we in fact asking: *"Are we being effective in keeping the Baptist family together?"* Answer: *"Probably not, but we'll have a jolly good go at it during this decade."* We are also asking: *"Are we being effective in our associating and sharing of resources?"* I sense that our present answer is: *"No we're not and before the whole system grinds to a halt through boredom and drop-out we had better rally the troops to be loyal to the structures."* And of course we can never be satisfied with the effectiveness of our evangelism and mission. These are all very good and important questions which we do need to be examined. But I would dare to suggest that we have not yet heard the dream with which people will identify and so encourage ownership. G. K. Chesterton once wrote:

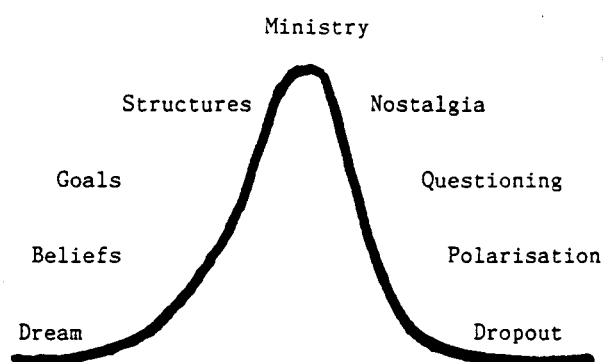
**When everything about a people is for the time growing weak and ineffective, it begins to talk about efficiency. Vigorous organisations talk not about their process, but about their aims.**

I am not sure that we yet know what our overarching aim should be.

I have been much struck with a graph which seems to illustrate our dilemma at this stage. It is taken from Robert Dale's "To Dream Again". He bases his analysis of church life on the wave cycle as observed by management consultants within commercial enterprises.



His adaptation to church life and structures is as follows:-



There is much to gain from reflection upon this organisational life-cycle. Many of our churches are on the upside of the cycle, but our association and denomination structures are still subject to the downside. Almost invariably the churches that are seeing growth in all senses of that word (not just numerical) are those where someone or a group are articulating a dream that is being owned by the members. Now I believe that our Ten-Year Plan could allow us to hear what God is saying. But I would encourage us to stay open so that we can together hear our leaders articulate the clear vision, dream, or aim

that I am sure that God is wanting to give to any part of his church that is serious about its task and calling. There is still a need to articulate the dream and I hope that we will not think that we have the goals sufficiently identified that people will opt in, because I am quite certain that they will not.

So drawing some thread together, the matters of cohesion, relationship and resource sharing, should not be made focal points in their own right. They are secondary and supportive goals which need to be related to an overall statement of our dream. When people see that the dream can only be achieved by relating and sharing, then there will be a motivation to commit ourselves and our resources to one another. This will not happen because of loyalty, or because of a call to be committed to the structures, or because of some wistful notion of the Baptist family, but because they know God is calling them and us all to a task beyond our resources and our parochial mind-set.

Finally, we need to ask the question whether our structures will ever allow us to hear that prophetic word. Unless we can encourage an ethos which puts a higher premium upon hearing the prophetic and recognising the apostolic, our Councils will be arenas in which we receive reports, make our points both negative and positive, and then get on with our own preoccupations which are the real business. No prophetic message ever came by the will of man or the resolution of committees and Councils. So we never go away from these gatherings saying: *"That was God speaking to us."* Rather we go away knowing that we have accomplished getting through an agenda but little more. If as members of these Councils the fire is not lit in our hearts, then how can we light the fire in our members' hearts. Some very searching questions need to be set against not only the manner of our business, but the very ethos that has developed in our gatherings. Only when there is this sense of *"God has spoken"*, will our churches arise, not merely as a denomination, but because the King in his redemption rights has spoken Kingdom words for Kingdom ends, and so his Church responds in humble and dependent obedience. Let the prophets speak! Let the gathered Church discern!

# **GROWING TOGETHER AS LEADERS: MINISTER / DEACONS / CHURCH MEETING**

## **A PARABLE**

*No illustration is perfect. Beware reading too much into what follows. It is intended as a scene-setter only! Other similar analogies might be of a ship or an orchestra. Write your own!*

There was once a Rugby Team. Often they all played together very well but it was not always so. The Captain was one of the Forwards and played Number 8. The Vice-Captain played midfield. Sometimes Team Members were at odds with themselves and indeed with their Captain/s. Now the rest of The Team and Supporters could see this. How could they not: they sometimes tackled each other on the field of play! Not much was achieved by or for The Team. Little lasting progress was made. The Captain/s were unhappy, the Team were unhappy and were struggling to hold their own or else just kept losing. The Team had everything going for it but it just could not sort out the relationships between the Captains the forwards, the rest of the team and the many supporters. In the end they were relegated! Ah but elsewhere another Team had really got its act together. All the disagreeing went on in the dressing room or in private conversations. In fact there wasn't really a lot of it! The team-talks and the review meetings were often long - and sometimes frank - but never would a Forward be seen criticising or undermining The Captains in public or vice-versa. Nor worse grabbing the ball from each other. No this Team worked together superbly. The Forwards and Backs trusted their Captain/s and, on the field, backed their judgment. The rest of The Team were inspired by this and loved to see the Captains, Forwards and Backs co-operating together so well. This spread to the supporters too and great progress was made. That Team swept away the opposition, had great territorial advantage and made many great advances. Little could stop them. The tries and the conversions were many! ? !

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*Observations on the Minister(s) / Deacons / Church Meeting relationship. With special thanks to Professor Graham Ashworth who both advised on and contributed to this paper. These are intended not as final positions but as reflections for constructive discussion after, between us, many years of experience of Baptist leadership in practice.*

\* **A Minister is NOT a Deacon. In biblical terms he is (like) a presbuteros = a presiding elder.** i.e. the Leader of The Deacons and the Church. See the Timothy letters. This is often recognised in Baptist circles by the role of Chairmanship given to The Minister/s in organisations and Meetings. It is also recognised - in many of our Churches - by the practice of a Deacon consulting with The Minister/s for their advice and judgement before agreeing to stand/stand again for election. The Minister/s should not have the final decision here however! A Minister has spiritual authority over The Deacons and Church but this needs to be a balanced authority to prevent abuse. See below. Trust in and support for a Church's presbuteros is vital. In Baptist Churches something of that authority is wisely shared with diakonoi, able men and women, who stand out from within the believing community. High standards are expected Rom. 16:1-2 & 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Churches which are growing and making progress nationally are often those who have learned this and so expect and respect the spiritual authority and lead of Minister/s (Elder/s) and Deacons, balanced by ultimate accountability to Church Meetings under God.

\* **A Minister carries something of the biblical prophet / priest / king motifs in his office and person. This must be balanced by the Servant motif.** This authority is derived from Jesus but, of course to a considerably lesser degree. 'Prophet' in that s/he is called both to encourage and rebuke the people of God. Also sometimes to lead them even where they do not want to be led and even if they murmur and complain about the journey / route and / or methods. See The Moses Stories in the OT! A 'Priest'. See the OT teaching on support, practically and spiritually for priests here. Also the NT teaching eg 1 Tim. 5:17-20. As for 'King' something at least of the Lord's kingly anointing rests on 'His anointed ones'. Ministers are those He has consecrated and called apart for His service. To prevent abuse here, however, these concepts need to be balanced by Jesus' teaching and example on Servanthood (Mark 10:45) and by the high standards expected of elders (eg 1 Tim. 3:1-7).

\* **Within the life of the Body of Christ, The Church, a Deacon's loyalty is to the Minister under God as well as to the sheep.** In the event of disagreement or of the sheep pulling one way / saying one thing



and the presbuteros another The Deacon will (normally) first give the benefit of the doubt to the Minister/s. S/He will be presumed, especially if he is a man of prayer and has been tested within and beyond the fellowship, to be right rather than wrong and innocent rather than guilty. In Acts 6:1-7 the Deacons were appointed first as a support and as assistants to the Leaders and only then as servants of the flock. Effective Diaconates of course achieve both.

\* **A Minister belongs to God and is His employee.**

He or she is a gift from God to a local congregation of believers. God cares about how we and our families are cared for, how people respond to our leadership and how His churches advance - or not - under our leadership. God the eternal Chess - player has the right, of course, to move us around and does so. Ephesians 4:11-13. Ministers' gifts and strengths vary.

\* **Criticisms and Admonitions.** a) Criticism and even accusations are to be expected by Leaders. The latter especially are serious matters. The biblical model for dealing with this is first a private word and only later if still necessary, public comment. Matt 18:15-17 applies to elders too. See also 1 Timothy 5:19. In Baptist Churches The Church Secretary or other such person is usually the person to pass on such criticism, though of course any Deacon may do it. Alternatively notice can be given for an item at a Deacons' Meeting. The wise Minister will also seek out a soul - friend to pastor and 'admonish' him in addition to these provisions. The Area Superintendent - episkopos - perhaps? ! ? b) On the other hand, one of the Minister's task is to "admonish" both Deacons and Church: "Now we ask you brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other." Prophetic sermons? Among the 'spiritual' this leads to repentance & to a refined and purified Church. One seeking to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ; to grow up into Christ, The Head; and one building itself up in love as each part does its work. (Eph 4: 14-16).

\* **Minister and Deacons all stand in need of God's forgiveness and mutual forgiveness of each other.**

Col. 3:12-14. This is mutually true between us and Church Members and Friends too. This truth is beautifully expressed by our standing together as Minister and Deacons at The Communion Table over the months each in need of each other's forgiveness and, above all, His. Col. 3:12-14. Our sinfulness and faults do not disqualify us from spiritual leadership. Hallelujah - that is Gracel

\* **The Church Meeting.** The priesthood of all believers means that each Christian has direct

access to God for worship, prayer, confession etc. It is a collective term in the NT i.e. the whole company of believers together exercise priesthood in its many forms and functions. It does NOT mean that within the Church, every voice opinion, suggested way forward, complaint or criticism is of equal validity. That makes a nonsense of the concept of spiritual authority and leadership taught, for example, in Eph. 4 or 1 & 2 Tim. A Church Meeting which appreciates the privilege of appointing a presbuteros and its Deacons AND which also knows how to trust, respond to and support and respect such leadership is operating biblically and healthily. So too does one which appreciates both the privilege and importance of consultation and of the role believers can play in together testing and seeking the mind of Christ. Vital too, if rarely used, is the Church Meeting's power of rejection or veto. Likewise its freedom to give a presbuteros notice or to refuse to re-elect an unsatisfactory Deacon. Mercifully such occasions are rare!

\* **Church Meetings.** A 'bad' Church Meeting may well be one where lots of contradictory opinions are expressed by all sorts of people. Biblically this is described and condemned as each man (or woman) thinking, doing and saying what seems right in his own eyes. A 'divided' Church Meeting. In the event of a close decision or serious questioning, The Diaconate Lead / Recommendation may well have been wrong. The recommendation, and the circumstances surround it, will then be reconsidered by a wise Diaconate, especially if the reservations are spoken by people of spiritual maturity and insight. A 'good' Church Meeting may well be one where not many people feel they have to speak. If The Minister and Deacons under God, have presented their recommendations or information clearly and unitedly this will often lead to quiet, unquestioning acceptance among Members. Prayer rather than debate is the more appropriate response. Far from minimising this, as some Baptists do, as mere 'rubber stamping', we should rejoice to see a Church Meeting operating biblically and with respect for its spiritual leadership. In contrast to this there will be some issues where it is wisest for the Church Meeting to share its views FIRST before the Deacons consider the matter further and then report back.

One of the curses of late C20th Baptist Church life is the assumption that everything has to be debated and discussed by everyone - from colour schemes through to choice of hymns! Let the Leaders, Committee chairpersons and the experienced lead. BUT let them always keep their ear to the ground and know how to listen as well!

Michael I. Bochenski



## MAINSTREAM AND CHURCH PLANTING



At the Mainstream conference we invited participants to complete a simple questionnaire about church planting. Looking back over the last two years and forward over the next five, we wanted to discover the state of play. Is church planting beginning to take root among

us? Are Baptists planting in numbers as yet? Or is the goal of 2,000 which was proposed by Baptists at the national Dawn conference a year ago absurdly unrealistic?

40 churches hadn't started a new congregation or church in the last two years and don't expect to in the next five years.

31 haven't started a new congregation in the last two years but their goal is to plant 43 in the next five.

25 churches have planted 27 new congregations in the last two years and plan to plant a further 35 in the next five.

In short, 96 churches responded, of which 56 churches have planted or intend to plant 105 churches.

To put this another way, 25 churches have planted 27 new congregations in the past two years, and in the next five years 56 churches intend to plant 78.

These figures make fascinating reading. There's a long way to go, but there are indisputable signs of a gathering momentum in mission. It's thrilling to see how many churches are taking planting seriously. And it's good to see that those who have planted already are not reverting to the old ways of maintenance, but pressing on to plant again.

To small churches for whom church planting is not a realistic option at present, we need to insist that church planting is by no means the only evangelistic strategy. We want to stand with you in your mission. Will you support with prayer and encouragement those who are starting new congregations?

To larger churches that haven't given a thought to church planting we lay down a challenge. Do you have a clear mission strategy, within which you have seriously considered whether church planting may play a strategic part? Or are you resting on your laurels, coasting downhill and still depending on the fruits of the evangelistic zeal of previous generations? It's all too tempting for the members and leaders of a large church with a full building on Sunday mornings to put up their feet and say, *"Praise God that we've done our bit already!"*

To those involved in planting we can plainly say there's no need to see yourselves doing something in isolation. You are part of a much bigger movement of God in this generation.

We also need to ask fresh questions about training. Who will provide the regional and national training that leadership teams require, to make church planting effective? Who will set church planting goals, to spur us on to growth? If a Word and Spirit Network arises among us, as I suggested in my last editorial and as we discussed at the Mainstream conference, these may be key ways for the network to contribute and take a lead.

Rob Warner

# DECISION-MAKING IN THE THOUGHT AND PRACTICE OF EARLY ENGLISH BAPTISTS

Paul Mortimore

During the political and religious ferment in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries one crucial issue concerned where ultimate human authority rests. Given that God is supreme over all the earth, to whom has he delegated the power of decision-making? In the church does the power rest in the Pope, in the Crown, in the synod of clergy or in the members of the local church? In the State does authority rest in the King, in a tyrant or in the people represented by Parliament?

The early Baptists were caught up in this ferment and, standing as they did in the tradition of the Reformers, the Puritans and the Separatists, the conclusions they reached bring us to the heart of the issues we must consider in this paper. In brief they concluded that life is not founded on coercion and submission, but on voluntary agreement and association. And in the affairs of State, their reasoning made them staunch Parliamentarians.

## ECCLESIOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Our account of Baptist thought and practice concerning decision-making necessarily arises out of an appreciation of Baptist ecclesiology, for it was from their theology of the church that early Baptists, together with the Independents, shaped those convictions about the seat of power and authority which have characterised Baptist thought and life for four hundred years.

Undergirding everything in their ecclesiology was the conviction that the church should be constituted and governed in keeping with biblical principles. They stood in the tradition of the Reformation with its call to ordinary people to test the teachings and practices of the Christian church by what they believed was the teaching of Scripture. In the early 1570's an anonymous Separatist writer both repudiated the authority of the Queen in matters of conscience and indicated that he had subscribed to a church covenant. "*The Queen's highness*", he wrote, "*has not authority to compel any man to believe anything contrary to God's Word.....our bodies, goods, and lives be at her commandment.....but the soul of man for religion is bound to none but unto God and his Holy Word*".<sup>1</sup> This conviction became fundamental to the shaping of Baptist ecclesiology. They assumed that in Scripture a blueprint existed for a properly constituted church, corresponding, they believed, to the early church and modelled on the apostolic ideal. For example, the Northern Particular Baptist Association at its meeting of messengers in 1699 considered the question:

Whether there be not in the New Testament containing the doctrine of Christ and his

commissioned ambassadors the Apostles rules of directions sufficient for the true right and orderly constituting of a Gospel church and also for the due orderly management of all affairs tending to their comfort and well-being.

The answer was given in the affirmative.<sup>2</sup>

Much followed from this fundamental conviction. On what they regarded as solid biblical grounds these early Baptists rejected a state church with its implication that membership of the local church corresponded with citizenship of the local community. They rejected also a hierarchical model of church government with bishops and episcopally ordained clergy. Over against this, and in company with others who in Michael Watts' phrase were "groping their way to an alternative conception of churchmanship",<sup>3</sup> they believed that the apostolic ideal was a voluntary, gathered community of believers, called out from the world.

Robert Browne in the early 1580's came to the conclusion that reformation along biblical lines could not be achieved within the parochial system and set in motion his own reformation "*without tarrying for any*". On the matter of church government he argued that authority in the church should rest, under Christ, with the company of believing Christians. "*The voice of the whole people*," he wrote, "*is said to be the voice of God*".<sup>4</sup> This was radical indeed.

The ferment concerning the church and its government touched the life of John Smyth and other Puritans living in the Lower Trent Valley, around Gainsborough, who "*as the Lord's free people joined themselves by a covenant of the Lord into the fellowship of the Gospel in a church estate*".

The earliest Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 witnesses that the same radical model of the church was also at the heart of this stream of early Baptist life. The church in its local expression:

is a company of visible saints, called and separated from the world.....being baptised into that faith and joined to the Lord and each other by mutual agreement.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of our theme it is important to single out and stress the emphasis in early Baptist ecclesiology on the responsible nature of a gathered community of believers, bound to God and to one another by covenant, with all its attendant privileges and obligations.

In his book Visible Saints, Geoffrey Nuttall quotes from William Bartlett's Model of The Primitive Congregational Way.

The visible Church-state, order, and polity, which Jesus Christ only has instituted and ordained under the New Testament, is a free society or communion of visible Saints, embodied and knit together by a voluntary consent.....in holy fellowship.<sup>6</sup>

Such instincts were also central to Baptist thought. This is illustrated clearly in the articles of the Gamlingay Church:

A true church of Christ consisteth of visible saints, and is a congregation of visible believers in Christ who are separated from the wicked world, and give themselves up unto God, and unto one another, walk with God and one another, in the faith of Christ and observation of all Gospel ordinances, and discharge of all relative duties as the Lord shall enable them.<sup>7</sup>

Each company of faithful, responsible people was regarded as competent in all matters of church life and order and several implications followed. The members of a covenant community were responsible for searching out together and then fulfilling God's purposes. The record of the beginning of the Particular Baptist Church in Bridlington, Yorkshire, states:

[The baptised believers] were formed into a Church state.....by declaring themselves willing to resign up themselves to the will, power and authority of Christ; promising, his grace and Spirit assisting them, to yield obedience to his blessed gospel.....<sup>8</sup>

A further implication of early Baptist ecclesiology was that each church was, under God, self-governing, responsible as stewards for the proper ordering and conduct of its corporate life. And all members shared that responsibility.

When in 1608 the Gainsborough group moved as exiles to Amsterdam, Smyth soon found himself in dispute with the separated church of Francis Johnson. One aspect of this dispute concerned church government. Johnson was attracted, not least by dissensions which had plagued his church since arriving in Amsterdam, to Presbyterianism, keeping the discipline and government of the church in the hands of himself and the churches' elders. Smyth replied with a clear exposition of what became Baptist orthodoxy on the question of church government. While the pastors and elders, he conceded, had "a leading, directing, and overseeing power.....the last definitive determining sentence is in the body of the church whereto the eldership is bound to yield". Though "the church may do any lawful act without the elders.....the elders can do nothing without the approbation of the body or contrary to the body".<sup>9</sup>

Particular Baptists also held the conviction that the local church comprised responsible members called to exercise self-government. The Second

London Confession of 1677 and 1689 stresses the point. To each church:

he has given all that power and authority, which is anyway needful, for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he has instituted for them to observe.<sup>10</sup>

Local church covenants and articles affirmed the same principle. For example, members of the Cottenham Church in Cambridgeshire affirmed that "*the church of Christ.....have her peculiar privileges - as any other civil society - to enjoy their own laws and government within themselves*".<sup>11</sup> In 1776 at a meeting of the St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, Robert Robinson gave "*a short discourse of fifteen minutes*" on the Baptist doctrine of the church and using references from the Acts of the Apostles demonstrated that in the New Testament period "*the power of church government*" was "*in the people*".<sup>12</sup>

We shall note later that both General and Particular Baptists guarded against isolationist independency by a strong commitment to association and this provided a further area in Baptist life for decision-making.

## THE CHURCH MEETING

Firstly we turn to consider the place of the church meeting as a decision-making forum in the history of Baptist thought and practice.

The important place assigned to the authority of the church meeting arose naturally and logically from Baptist convictions about the church as a responsible, self-governing community of gathered believers covenanted to God and to each other. Because the church was understood not as a human institution but as a divinely created society, the church meeting was not seen merely as an expression of democracy in action but rather as an occasion when God spoke to the church and the gathered community was called to discern and receive the will of God.

Robert Walton quotes from Daniel Jenkins who in his book The Nature of Catholicity highlights the historical congregational importance of the church meeting by contrast with other streams of Christian thought.

The trouble with traditional Catholicism in practice - and this is true of Presbyterianism also to some extent - is that the ordinary member has little opportunity of expressing his membership of the church except through his attendance at divine service and his obedience to his pastors.....he is the churches' child who is not allowed to take upon himself the responsibilities of spiritual manhood, but lives perpetually in the period between baptism and confirmation. Jenkins proceeds to contrast this with a properly

ordered Congregational church, and we would add a properly ordered Baptist church, in which the Christian:

is ready for living.....as a responsible person in the family of Christ's people, and the church meeting, gathered together at the heart of the household of faith.....is the means through which he can do so. He has the right to share in all the joys and sorrows, the privileges and the burdens, of the household and to speak his mind in his turn as the Spirit gives him utterance with the freedom of the Christian man.<sup>13</sup>

Given that exalted view of the church meeting it is easier to understand why absence from it without good cause was considered a serious breach of obligation. In 1728, for example, the Willingham Church in Cambridgeshire appointed a member to enquire of certain brothers *"the reason why they were not at the church meeting"*.<sup>14</sup> Low attendance at church meetings dealt a blow to the view of the occasion as the forum in which God in Christ spoke to the gathered community through the promptings of his Holy Spirit. If all vital decisions were taken in that forum, then it was essential that people attended.

The seriousness with which early Baptists viewed the church meeting is also found in censures on those who left early. The Cambridge Church Book records that at a church meeting every member was given to understand that he should not *"depart without leave before the meeting should be finished"*. The same section of these records sheds light on certain procedural practices. *"If two members rose together to speak, the majority should determine to whom the liberty of speaking first should be allowed."*<sup>15</sup>

The decision-making process in these churches involved accepting the will of the majority expressed through a vote. Submission to the will of that majority by any minority group was seen as an expression of covenant obligation. For example, in the Articles of Faith drawn up by the Cottenham Church it was agreed *"that the lesser part rest silent in the judgement of the greater in matters of debate.....for without submitting ourselves to one another no church acts can be managed, or matters put upon the trial decided but that schisms, rent, divisions and offences will come"*.<sup>16</sup> The Articles of the Haddenham Church state likewise that it is the duty of members:

to comply.....with the voice of their brethren; a majority of which in all cases, whether it respects the choice of officers, the admission or excluding of members, or any other matter, of whatever kind or nature it may be will ever be considered as the voice of the church.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst emphasising the responsibility which in early

Baptist thought rested on the whole church to make decisions, it is appropriate to point out that women were not included in the decision-making process until, during the eighteenth century, a gradual move took place to give women a share in church government and their votes were increasingly allowed in the decisions made. For example, in the series of statements drawn up by the Cambridge Church around 1720, in the section dealing with the choice of their ministers it is stated: *"in most [congregations] the women have a vote, though no voice"*.<sup>18</sup> In this the Cambridge Church may have been unusual and ahead of its time. Other churches, until much later, excluded women from voting as well as speaking.

As examples of the importance of the church meeting as a decision-making forum in Baptist life we now turn to consider three issues which were central matters of decision-making for early Baptists: the calling and leadership of ministers; the handling of applications for membership; and matters of discipline.

### CALL AND MINISTRY OF PASTORS

An important issue exercising the decision-making powers of the church meeting concerned the congregation's leadership and in particular the call and ministry of pastors.

Part of Smyth's criticism of the National Church was that its members:

suffered themselves to be deprived and robbed of the power of Christ to choose their own officers.<sup>19</sup>

This criticism of the established church remained deeply entrenched and more than a century later Andrew Fuller in his Grand Objections made the same point - imposition of ministers contrary to the free election of the people.

Both General and Particular Baptists recognised that to have good ministry and leadership was immensely important for properly constituted congregations. A church without pastoral oversight could be described as *"a destitute church"*,<sup>20</sup> but the crucial point for our purposes is that each congregation had authority and responsibility to appoint its own leaders. This is stated clearly in the 1644 Particular Baptist Confession and confirmed in the 1677 Confession.

Every church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons.....and that none other has power to impose them, either these or any other.<sup>21</sup>

The 1679 General Baptist Orthodox Creed states that a true constituted church has *"ministers or pastors of God's appointing and the church's election"*.<sup>22</sup>

Central to our concern is both the decision-making process by which leaders were appointed

and the subsequent relationship between pastor and people in matters of authority and decision-making.

John Smyth taught that the way of receiving leaders into office was firstly by election, secondly by approbation and thirdly by ordination.

Election is by most voices of the members of the church in full communion.....approbation is the examining and finding the officer elect to be according to the rules of his church.....ordination is the dedication of the officer thus approved to his office.<sup>23</sup>

There were times when the prerogative of the church meeting in this matter was severely tested. For example, the beginnings of the Stone-Yard, later the St. Andrew's Street Church in Cambridge, can be traced to dissension within the Hog's Hill Dissenting congregation over the call of the minister. In 1720 the church's loyalty was divided between a Mr. Davis and a Mr. Throgmorton. "Mr. Throgmorton's adherents," records Robert Robinson, "forgetting for a moment the principles of their dissent, by a constable refused the pulpit to Davis: who therefore, with 100 members dissented again" Robinson describes how "the imposition of the minister not only without the concurrence, but in direct opposition to the unbiased votes of the majority, the supporting of such a conduct by the civil power, seemed such essential violations of the original principles of their dissent, that the dissatisfied party - withdrew". They established a new congregation called Stone-Yard and Mr. Davis was recognised there as pastor.<sup>24</sup>

But when all went well it was normal for a church upon losing its minister, following "many meetings of prayer", to invite several ministers to preach among them. It was also quite normal for a church seeking a pastor to consult with their prospective minister's present church. Once a man was invited by a church to minister among them, a probationary period followed, often referred to as being "on trial". This period preceded any final decision taken by the church as to whether to call someone to the pastorate. Such a period might last anything from a few weeks to over twelve months. The church at Bridlington had James Hepburn on trial for the pastorate for nearly five years before concluding that his gifts did not qualify him for the task.<sup>25</sup> The custom of the trial period died out in the second half of the nineteenth century, when churches usually gave a minister a clear invitation once the decision to call him had been made.

If a church became convinced that the man "on trial" was God's provision for their need, then a formal "call" was issued, normally in writing, and signed on occasions by all the church members.

The process outlined above suggests that churches took seriously this aspect of their decision-making responsibilities. Appointments were not made rashly and this only confirms the importance attached by these congregations to competent

and worthy pastoral oversight.

In the seventeenth century it was more typical for ministers to be "called forth" from the local congregations, a practice to which both the 1660 General Baptist Confession and the 1656 Particular Baptist Somerset Confession bear witness.<sup>26</sup>

Gifts of preaching and leadership were recognised and the churches were responsible then for authorising those clearly called and gifted for ministry.

The General Meeting of messengers of the Northern Association in April 1699 affirmed that: "If a gift or gifts be in the church" it is "the duty of a church to lay such persons under obligation to bring them forth that the church may enjoy the benefit thereof and the end of Christ answered in some measure."<sup>27</sup>

Nobody was allowed to preach unauthorised by the gathered community. At another meeting of the Northern Association messengers in 1700 the question was considered: "Whether any member in the church ought to preach in the church or without the church without the churches consent." The answer given was:

Every member that may take upon him the great work of preaching of the Word ought first to be tried by the church and if the church disprove his gift he ought to forebear, but if the church approve of it she ought to dispose of it as she thinks meet.<sup>28</sup>

It is noteworthy for us that in 1716 a question was discussed by the Association which indicates that some leaders within a church were seeking to remove from a person the right to preach. The question was whether:

Any remote part or wing of any church or churches of Jesus Christ may orderly and upon scriptural grounds silence and stop the mouths of any of their gifted brethren whom she has formally approved of, without the bodies consent.....?

The answer was unequivocal: "that such disorderly actings and proceedings is no less than open breaches of the plain rule of God's sacred Word".<sup>29</sup>

This evidence supports strongly the case that the church meeting alone had authority to call out or to silence gifts from its membership.

The relationship between pastor and people in matters of authority and decision-making was always finely balanced between two poles. Once called to the pastorate of a church, a minister could expect to receive proper respect and honour as a servant of God. "They are sent by God to preach whom the church sendeth" wrote Smyth. Nehemiah Cox, in a sermon preached at the ordination of an elder and deacon in a London congregation in 1681 stated that when the church has duly elected its elders, "Christ approved their choice and the Holy Ghost makes them overseers".<sup>30</sup>

The early Confessions testify to the expectation that properly appointed pastors and elders were to exercise responsible leadership. The 1679 General Baptist Orthodox Creed states that "Officers, appointed by Christ" were "chosen by his church, for the peculiar administration of ordinances and execution of the power and duty Christ has enjoined them.....". The marks of a properly constituted church includes "having discipline and government duly executed by ministers of God's appointing and the church's election....."<sup>31</sup> The 1677 Particular Baptist Confession states that a church gathered and organised according to the mind of Christ "consists of officers.....appointed by Christ.....for the peculiar administration of ordinances and execution of power or duty which he entrusts them with".<sup>32</sup>

Raymond Brown cites a letter, signed by all the members, inviting Robert Reynoldson to the pastorate at Wisbech Church and promising "our support of your authority in all cases of church government and discipline".<sup>33</sup>

But for all their responsibility to lead, ministers and elders were always answerable and subject to the covenanted community. Smyth stressed the ultimate power of the whole church membership, which was over and above any power of any elders in the congregation. The pastoral, teaching and ruling functions of the eldership were answerable to the church and the minister's authority was derived from the church. The minister was still regarded as a normal church member and, like every other member, was expected to be subject to the mind and will of the church meeting.

The point is well illustrated in the church book of the Cambridge Church. In 1777 the church established the principle that the pastor was not to nominate his favourite candidates for the office of deacon. The matter was of such importance that Robinson put the question publicly to the nominee at a church meeting in April 1777: "Brother, have I, or the officers, or any other persons, said or done anything directly, or indirectly, to influence your nomination?" The answer was in the negative.<sup>34</sup>

The minister's subjection to the authority of the church extended to his submitting to the discipline of the church if circumstances warranted it. Barry White cites the case of William Kiffin and other leaders of the London Particular Baptist churches who met at Devizes in Wiltshire in July 1657 to discuss matters relating to the support of ministers. They agreed that no minister should allow his salary to be augmented by state support and, should he persist in doing so, his church should discipline him to the point, if necessary, of excommunication.<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately the continuance of the man in pastorate depended on the decision of the church meeting. Brown cites the Soham Church book which records that in 1841 the church meeting discussed the matter of "our minister's continuance with us". At a later meeting the votes were received and "the

majority was for the pastor remaining".<sup>36</sup> Similarly the articles from the St. Andrews Street Church dealing with the choice of ministers states that "each church also claims the power of excluding as well as of calling a pastor".<sup>37</sup>

## APPLICATIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP

A further important aspect of the decision-making responsibility of a Baptist church meeting was considering applications for church membership. Commitment to building up a pure fellowship of saints ensured that early Baptists dealt with such applications with great seriousness and care.

The demands on an applicant were rigorous and more was required than agreement to a mere declaration of faith. Evidence had to be given of what Thomas Collier described as the "heart confession" or "evident demonstration of the new birth". As early as 1654 a query was put to the Western Association at Taunton "whether any are to be received into the church of Christ only upon a bare confession of Christ being come in the flesh and assenting to the doctrine and order laid down by him?" The answer was clear:

They may not be admitted on such terms without a declaration of the experimental work of the Spirit upon the heart, through the word of the gospel and suitable to it, being attended with evident tokens of conversion, to the satisfaction of the administrator and brethren or church concerned in it.<sup>38</sup>

Concern for evidence of an experimental work of God in the soul led these early Baptists to require an applicant to give testimony at a church meeting concerning their faith. The Willingham Church declared in its covenant in 1726 "that we do admit members only upon a testimony, and declaration (by speaking) of the work of God upon their souls....."<sup>39</sup> It was no formality. On occasions a church decided to refer an applicant to further conversation with the minister or to be catechised. The candidate, after giving testimony, left the meeting whilst the church discussed his or her application. If the church was satisfied with the testimony, then a vote was taken. The candidate had to satisfy the majority of members present at the church meeting that he or she would prove an exemplary and effective member.

The records of the Broadmead church in Bristol indicate similarly that applications for membership were treated by the church with great seriousness. Following "their several declarations of the work of God upon their spirits, all declaring that they were born again and how God wrought the change upon their hearts, and brought them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ", the applicants withdrew and the members then discussed each application individually and with great care.<sup>40</sup>

For some applicants this procedure proved a demanding ordeal and records preserve stories of people being tongue-tied, breaking down and frequently speaking so quietly that it was difficult to hear them. For the purposes of our theme this latter problem focuses the seriousness with which the churches took their responsibility. In 1825 the Cottenham church was embarrassed by the fact that among several applicants for membership "some.....were so low in speaking.....it was almost impossible for the members to have given a decision upon what they said".<sup>41</sup>

The practice of requiring an applicant to give testimony in front of the whole church was not followed inflexibly or invariably. Pastoral sensitivity was exercised in dealing with those who were perhaps unused to speaking in public or who were shy and of a nervous disposition and found it difficult to give a lucid account of God's dealings with them. Where an applicant could not face the ordeal, the church appointed representatives to visit the applicant and bring a report to the church.

At a meeting of messengers of the Northern Association, in April 1711, several questions were debated and answered, among them being "whether persons propounding to a church in order to communion should do it to the whole church or some in private". The answer given was:

we judge that persons proposing for baptism in order for communion should do it in the face of the church if possibly it can be done in order to prevent dissatisfaction in any member and to preserve the churches' power in churches' own hand. But in case some persons want boldness to do it in public we think they may do it in private to some few members with the minister or ministers deputed by the church we being unwilling to discourage any enquiring persons or making edicts where God makes none or of limiting the Spirit of God.<sup>42</sup>

A. G. Matthews in his Diary of a Cambridge Minister records how a member of Joseph Hussey's church in Cambridge "had attempted three or four times before to speak of the dealings of God with her soul and was disabled from going on through the narrative thereof".<sup>43</sup> In such cases flexibility was widely practised by the churches. For example, Hannah Foster, an applicant for membership when Robert Robinson was minister at Cambridge, confessed to him that she had "not courage to profess her faith and repentance in public before all the church". She therefore "requested the pastor to repeat in private what she had said on those articles to him in private". Robinson complied with her request and quoted biblical authority for his action, namely the way Barnabas spoke to the church on behalf of Saul.<sup>44</sup>

## DISCIPLINE

A third and major area of decision-making responsibility in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Baptist congregations was the exercise of church discipline.

It was an aspect of church life again resulting directly from their ecclesiology. The covenant and corporate relationship into which believers voluntarily entered brought not only the privileges of being cared for by your fellow members but also the responsibility of being subject to the disciplinary scrutiny and correction of the church. Records indicate that considerable time was spent in church meetings deciding matters of discipline as churches sought to maintain both proper church order and that purity of life and separation from the world which were worthy of visible saints.

Undergirding this concern with discipline was again a will to submit to the demands of Scripture. Raymond Brown records that when checking a disciplined member the Fenstanton church claimed that their desire was "to be guided by the written Word".<sup>45</sup> The dominical injunction of Matthew 18:17-18 provided the basic scriptural warrant for the exercise of discipline and it was frequently cited. It was also fundamental to their practice in this matter that the whole congregation was involved in decision-making. It was the church, said Smyth, to which Christ had given power to receive in, to preserve and keep and to cast out and all members should be involved in the decisions taken. The 1611 Declaration of Faith confirms this principle:

That brethren impenitent in one sin after the admonition of the church are to be excluded the communion of the saints.....and therefore not the committing of sin cut off any from the church, but refusing to hear the church to reformation.<sup>46</sup>

Particular Baptists held similar convictions on this issue. The 1644 Confession states:

Christ has likewise given power to his whole church to receive in and cast out, by way of excommunication, any member; and this power is given to every particular congregation and not one particular person, either member or officer, but the whole.<sup>47</sup>

The theme we are considering does not call for a detailed account of the issues concerning which churches were asked to make disciplinary decisions, but the method of dealing with these matters illustrates the way in which these churches exercised their authority. The Matthew 18 passage provided the basic framework of the procedure followed. There was some variation among churches but the authority of the church was generally expressed in four stages.

Conduct or attitudes thought to deserve discipline were first investigated by the church's representatives. The visitors reported back to the church



meeting and if grounds for discipline were established the offender was laid "under church censure" or in another phrase was subject to the "first admonition". This admonition was delivered publicly at a church meeting to which the offender was "warned in" or by a written statement, or by representatives of the church.

Members under discipline were always given the opportunity to appear before the church in order to explain themselves or express genuine repentance. The pastor at Over told the members of his conversation with a repentant offender: "I advised her to come to the church meeting." Raymond Brown describes how the penitent sister attended the meeting and the minister "requested her to stand up and just express her desire unto them, which she complied with, and said that she had not been comfortable for some time". After hearing her confession the members were invited to raise their hands if they were willing to receive her back and the disciplined offender was re-admitted to the fellowship.<sup>48</sup>

If no repentance was forthcoming then the "second admonition" or suspension was applied. This amounted to suspension from the Lord's Table for a stated period of time. A former pastor of the Gamlingay congregation, guilty of drinking to excess, was disciplined in 1773 as "under a suspension but not cut off".<sup>49</sup>

If the second admonition failed to secure the offender's repentance then a church had recourse to "separation" which meant that the disciplined member was "withdrawn from" or "cut off" from the covenant community until he or she showed signs of genuine repentance.

The final sanction was excommunication. Reclamation was worked for where possible and expulsion was only rarely applied.

Churches were frequently reminded that dealing with disciplinary matters required sensitivity as well as rigour. Calvin, who influenced early English Baptists in this matter, had made it clear that excommunication should be regarded as a temporary punishment, whose ultimate intention is nothing less than the restoration of the offender: "If we wish to do good, gentleness and mildness are necessary, that those who are reprov'd may know that they are nevertheless loved".

The 1644 Confession struck a similar note.

Every particular member of each church, how excellent, great, or learned so ever, ought to be subject to this censure and judgement of Christ; and the church ought with great care and tenderness, with due advice to proceed against her members.<sup>50</sup>

There is considerable evidence that churches sought to heed this injunction. For example, it was recognised that rumours arising from gossip or

incorrect information may expose members to unfair accusation. For this reason church meetings insisted on the necessity of good evidence in cases of discipline and often refused to address a disciplinary matter until the "authenticity of a charge" was proved. In 1782 a member of the Isleham Church was insistent that a fellow member should be "immediately cut off" for "having failed in the world". The subsequent discussion is important ".....but the church thought that they had nothing to do with it till somebody should prove that he had defrauded them". In this case "none could lay it to his charge that he spent his money by drinking, gaming etc." And there was only one church member "that could bring an accusation against him". It was noted that in any case this particular member was not present at the meeting where the matter was being discussed so "the church judged they had no business with it at present".<sup>51</sup>

For all the emphasis on the whole church being involved in taking decisions on disciplinary issues, there are examples when, out of pastoral sensitivity, it was deemed appropriate for the church's leadership to deal with the matter without reference to the church meeting. For example, in 1771 Robert Robinson received a letter which made an accusation against "an upright member" in the Cambridge church. The pastor believed it to be false and advised the church not to hear the letter but to refer the whole matter to the officers of the church and two additional church members. This group were to "attest the member's innocence, if innocent; if not, that they should accuse him next church meeting". Their subsequent discussion revealed that the member had been unjustly accused and the church meeting "highly approved" Robinson's view that the entire church membership should not hear "such an accusation against such a man".<sup>52</sup>

A few years later Robinson was involved in another disciplinary matter concerning "indecent and obscenities" and he believed that the matter would be better dealt with without endangering the morals of the younger members of the church by bringing the issue into the open. For our purposes it is noteworthy that Robinson acknowledged such an action was "subversive of all their leading principles of church government" but, in this case, he was deeply convinced that his course was both wise and necessary.<sup>53</sup>

Among the General Baptists, the decision taken by the local church was not necessarily the last word. A member who had been disciplined for an offence had a right of appeal from the local church to the Association and from the Association to the General Assembly.<sup>54</sup>

The same provision appears not to have been present in Particular Baptist churches. For example, at a General Meeting of messengers of the Northern Association in June 1701, among other queries debated was this:

What method may be taken with a brother who has taken an offence against another brother and will not come before the church that the matter may be reconciled but will have that brother before another church to which they stand in no relation or else will not be reconciled?

The answer given was twofold.

1. The person that is unwilling to have the matter tried and decided in the church to whom they both stand related is disorderly and ought to be dealt with according to the rule of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Matthew 18:15-17 is then cited for support.]
2. We look upon it to be altogether contrary to gospel rule for any member to go from their own to any other church to have their difference tried.<sup>56</sup>

It appears from this example that for the Particular Baptists there was no higher court of appeal than the local church. If a member took even a justifiable grievance to any other church for satisfaction, then he must be dealt with as disorderly himself - even if he were completely in the right in the matter.

Records provide poignant evidence that at times church meetings took decisions to discipline their pastors and leaders. For example, John Davis, whose part in the beginnings of the Baptist church at Cambridge we have noted, was under suspicion of making his servant, Prudence Corbin, pregnant. Some thought him innocent whilst the majority believed him guilty. The matter at every stage was determined by the decision of the church meeting until eventually the church voted to exclude him. *"88 members (40 men, and 48 women) were for Mr. Davis's exclusion. 44 others (13, and 31 women) were for restoring and continuing him. The majority prevailed,"* records Robinson, who goes on to describe how the 44 who were for Davis separated from the church and moved to Barnwell with Davis as their pastor.<sup>56</sup> Clearly there were cases where the minority felt unable to submit to the majority.

## ASSOCIATIONS/ASSEMBLIES

Our examination of early Baptist thought and practice on the theme of decision-making and the location of authority within the church needs finally to take account of the wider expression of church life represented by Baptist Associations and Assemblies. The perception of Baptists as those who in their history have embraced the cause of unbridled independency is clearly not borne out by the evidence.

Early Baptist commitment to interdependency among the congregations is evidenced both by the formation of associations linking the churches together and by the commitment to associating

enshrined within the seventeenth-century Confessions. There was a clear difference of perception between the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists concerning the measure of authority vested in Associations and Assemblies, but a common commitment prevailed in both streams of Baptist life to the principle of co-operation and fellowship beyond the local church.

The 1644 Particular Baptist Confession contains statements which provided the basis for later development of Association life:

*And although the particular congregations be distinct and several bodies, everyone is a compact and knit city in itself; yet they are all to walk by one and the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.<sup>57</sup>*

The 1677 Confession agreed that disputes with a given congregation might be usefully resolved by a conference of churches:

*"....it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider, and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned".*

The Confession asserted that such conferences had only advisory powers and no *"church-power properly so called"*. Such gatherings had no jurisdiction over the churches nor could they *"impose their determinations on the churches or officers"*.<sup>58</sup>

The formation of associations of churches, some as early as the 1650's, illustrates the will of churches to implement the spirit of these Confessions. The Abingdon Association was founded in 1652 and its Agreement states:

*"there is the same relation betwixt the particular churches each towards other as there is betwixt particular members of one church. For the churches of Christ do all make up one body or church in general under Christ their head...."*<sup>59</sup>

The Midland Association which met at Warwick in 1655 also agreed a Confession of Faith as a basis for the Association. Churches were to be helpful to each other in resolving controversies which might afflict any particular church and gifted men might be sent to the churches for their edification. It was also agreed that each church should watch over every other and care for one another, that the purity of doctrine might be maintained and God be glorified.<sup>60</sup>

The aims of these Associations found clearest expression in the Association meetings. These were sometimes referred to as *"general meetings of messengers"* and were more than opportunities

merely for talking and sharing views; they were occasions when weaker congregations could be encouraged and when representatives of the churches submitted to the mind of the Association as the will of God was sought concerning particular problems within the individual churches. As the messengers studied together the Word of God, a corporate mind on the issues emerged and the Association's council was then passed on to the churches. The effect that this advice and counsel had on the churches was then reported back to the next annual meeting. The records of the Northern Association meeting in 1701 state: ".....it is concluded that all the messengers of the associate congregations shall bring in an account at the next general meeting of the several results concluded in this meeting and the performance of them".<sup>61</sup>

Whilst the Association could not be coercive or prescriptive, the recommendations made by the messengers were designed to give a lead to all the member churches. The recommendations were often supported by scripture references, so some responsibility lay on the churches to find any scriptural justification for not complying with the recommendations of the Association.

The same principles were applied to National Assemblies. They represented simply another forum for churches to meet and discern together the will of God and address those issues which were of common interest and concern. At the National Assembly held in 1689, with persecution behind them and greater scope for inter-church activity ahead, the messengers underscored carefully the relationship between the Assembly and the individual congregations. It was a forum for counsel and discussion and not a legislative body bent on weakening the autonomy of the local church. However, since "all things we offer by way of counsel and advice, be proved out of the Word of God, and the Scriptures annexed", they believed that their decisions reflected the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures, and so was authority enough.<sup>62</sup>

Turning now to the General Baptists we discover that their ecclesiology differed in some measure from the Particular Baptists with respect to the decision-making authority of Associations and Assemblies. They repudiated independency declaring that polity to be "very dangerous and detrimental to the churches" and claimed in the 1679 Orthodox Creed that properly constituted General Assemblies of representatives of their churches "make but one church".<sup>63</sup> They believed that at Assemblies decisions could be made affecting the separate congregations and that they had the right and powers "to hear and determine as also to excommunicate" in cases of dispute.

Thomas Grantham, a General Baptist leader, in an influential book discussed the role and importance of General Assemblies and concluded that the discussion of controversial issues in the churches

helped "to stop the current of heresy, and to keep the churches in unity, both in doctrine and manners.....". General Baptist churches were not always in agreement about the legislative power of the Assembly but none denied its important role in shaping the accepted policy and maintaining the cohesion of the denomination.<sup>64</sup>

In line with this polity the General Baptists taught that there was an order of Messengers over and above that of the local churches' elders or pastors. The 1679 Orthodox Creed states: "the way appointed by Christ for the calling.....unto the office of bishop, or messenger.....is, viz, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church". They would then have "the government of those churches, that had suffrage in their election, and no other ordinarily".<sup>65</sup>

Despite this churchmanship having distinct Presbyterian features, the General Baptist Assembly by and large there was an attempt in the work of the General Baptist Assembly in the matter of decision-making to maintain a true balance between the rights of the congregations and the larger needs of the denomination.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to do no more than note how some of the tensions we have detected in early Baptist thought and practice still engage our minds and to plead that the record of our heritage is at least pondered in the midst of all the current debating and questioning.

For example, the tension between authority and decision-making powers vested in leaders and that vested in the gathered congregation is a lively issue for us in Britain, especially since the rise of the Charismatic Movement and "Restorationism". The leadership model in the "new churches" tends towards a plurality of elders, vested with considerable powers of decision-making in church affairs. Debate concerning the power of decision-making and the parameters of that power vested in those called to leadership needs to be fully aired now as it did in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. Bernard Green in a letter to ministers in early 1984 argued that those in the Free Church tradition have always rejected the claims of anyone but Christ to rule his body. To lead it, yes. To teach it, yes. To serve it, yes.....but to rule it, no". It was an unfortunate choice of words, for the early Confessions clearly state that those set apart by a church for leadership are expected "to govern",<sup>66</sup> "to execute power",<sup>67</sup> "to rule".<sup>68</sup> What did such words mean then, and what light can early Baptist thought and practice shed on our contemporary struggles with this theme?

The rise in 1813 of the Baptist Union and its subsequent development brought into sharper focus the tension between the authority of the local church and that of the wider association of congregations.

gations. Ernest Payne in the 1940s could write: *"The fifty or sixty years that have witnessed this remarkable growth in a central denominational organisation have seen also a decline in the strict and responsible churchmanship of the local congregation. To some extent the two things are related."*<sup>69</sup> That statement provides ample scope for discussion.

Thirdly, in Western culture with its strong strain of individualism, the tension between the rights of the individual and the health and well-being of the corporate, covenanted body becomes a major issue. In recent times several voices have been raised in efforts to reclaim the early high ideal for the church meeting and have argued that consensus rather than the democratic model of voting should shape the decision-making process. At the same time others search after models of discipline appropriate to the church in the late twentieth century.

It is appropriate that we leave the last word to Ernest Payne whose challenge needs still to be heard by the world-wide Baptist community:

Baptists have probably suffered as much as any Christian community of recent years from the general slackness, casualness and confusion regarding the doctrine of the Church, and have departed as widely as any from the traditions of their fathers. If they are to make their contribution to the modern discussion of these questions and to meet the challenge of the modern situation, one of their first tasks is to rediscover what have been the essential and characteristic notes of their witness.<sup>70</sup>

## NOTES

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55. Copson, op. cit; p.43
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57. McGlothlin, op. cit; p.186
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## **THE WORD AND SPIRIT NETWORK**

Following the considerable interest shown at the Mainstream conference, a consultation day for all those interested in becoming part of such a network will be held at Sutton Coldfield Baptist Church on Wed 26th May, 10 am - 4 pm. If you would like to attend (bringing your own lunch), please phone the administrator at Sutton Coldfield, Derek Wick, on 021-355-5088. If you would like a copy of the proposals which have been drafted so far, please phone Rob Warner on 071-274-5445 (Herne Hill Baptist Church Office)

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### **MAINSTREAM CONFERENCE Jan 17th - 19th 1994**

We are delighted to announce that the main speaker at the January 1994 conference will be William Kumuyi. Dr Kumuyi, a Nigerian aged 50, is the founder of the Deeper Life Bible Church of Lagos. This church has grown very rapidly to become the third largest church in the world. In 1973 there were 15 members. In 1982 this had grown to 5,000. Today there are some 80,000 members plus 40,000 children. More than 2,000 Deeper Life Churches have been planted, in over 30 African countries and more recently they have planted into Europe too.

Dr Kumuyi was a University lecturer in Mathematics before entering full time Christian ministry. He is a highly gifted Bible teacher who communicates a clarion call to faith and holiness. As well as leading the Deeper Life church he is a gifted evangelist, conducting major campaigns in Nigeria and abroad, and has a healing ministry. He is also the co-ordinator for the African continent of the AD2000 movement, which calls for "A church for every people and the gospel for every person by AD2000."

His visit to Mainstream promises to be a memorable and decisive turning point for British leaders ready to learn from the wonderful things God is doing in Africa today.

For a booking form and further details, write to Mr Derek Wick, Mainstream Conference Secretary, Sutton Coldfield Baptist Church, Trinity Hill, Sutton Coldfield, B72 1TA. If you want to make sure of places for your church leaders, enclose a non-returnable deposit of £10 per person.