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# **RADICAL BELIEVERS**

**The Baptist way  
of being the church**

**by**

**Paul Beasley-Murray**

**Third edition 2020  
Paul Beasley-Murray Books  
[www.paulbeasleymurray.com](http://www.paulbeasleymurray.com)**

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## A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paul Beasley-Murray read Modern Languages (French and German) and Theology at Jesus College, Cambridge. While completing a PhD in New Testament studies at Manchester University, he trained for the ministry at the Northern Baptist College, Manchester, and at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüslikon-Zurich. Ordained on 10 October 1970, he served with the Baptist Missionary Society in Congo/Zaire, where he taught New Testament and Greek in the Protestant Theological Faculty of the National University (1970-1972). Paul pastored two churches: Altrincham Baptist Church, Cheshire (1973-1986) and Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, Essex (1993-2014). He was also Principal of Spurgeon's College, London (1986-1992).

Throughout his ministry Paul has been a prolific author. In addition to *Radical Believers: the Baptist way of being the church* he has written *Radical Disciples: a course for new Christians* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1996; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2005; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2020) and *Radical Leaders: a guide for elders and deacons in Baptist churches* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1997; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2005; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2020). He also wrote *Baptism, Belonging and Breaking of Bread: preparing for baptism* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 2010; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2020). All of these are available electronically and are to be found on his website: [www.paulbeasleymurray.com](http://www.paulbeasleymurray.com)

Paul has written widely on ministry. His books in print or available electronically include *Power for God's Sake? Power & Abuse in the Local Church* (Paternoster 1998; republished Wipf & Stock 2005); *Transform Your Church: 50 Very Practical Steps*, (IVP 2005); a four-volume guide to ministry, *Living Out the Call* (Feed-a-Read 2015; revised 2016); *Make the Most of Retirement: a guide for ministers* (BRF 2020); and *Fifty Lessons in Ministry: Reflections after Fifty Years of Ministry* (DLT 2020). In 2017 he updated two booklets on pastoral care, *A Loved One Dies: Help in the first few weeks* and *Happy Ever After? A workbook for couples preparing for marriage*, both published by the College of Baptist Ministers and available in print and also electronically on his website

Paul has also written on preaching. His books in print include *The Message of the Resurrection* (IVP 2000); *Joy to the World: Preaching at Christmas* (IVP 2005); and *There is Hope: Preaching at Funerals* (IVP 2021).

He has had published two research reports on retirement: *Retirement Matters for Ministers: A report into a research project into how Baptist ministers experience retirement* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2018); and *Entering New Territory. Why are retired Baptist ministers moving to Anglican churches? What are the underlying theological issues?* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2019), both of which are available in print and electronically.

More generally he wrote his autobiography; *This is my story: a story of life, faith, and ministry* (Wipf & Stock 2018)

Every Thursday he posts a blog relating to *Church Matters*.

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

*Radical Believers* went out of print around the time I retired in 2014. In 2020 I decided to revise the second edition, not least because the section on Baptist Union structures was very much out of date. Currently this third edition is only available electronically.

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It has been extraordinarily gratifying to see the way in which the first edition of *Radical Believers* sold and sold. One print run followed another, with the result that *Radical Believers* became Baptist Publications' number one best-seller. What is more, *Radical Believers* has also been adapted and translated into several other languages: e.g. there has been a German edition (*Miteinander Gemeinde bauen: ein anderer Weg, Kirche zu sein*; Oncken Verlag, Wuppertal & Kassel 1995) as also a Norwegian edition (*Radikale Kristne*, Norsk Litteraturselsap, Stabekk 2000), and I am told that there is a Bulgarian edition too!

However, after ten years the time has come to revise the text, not least because the life of Baptist churches has moved on and a number of far-reaching structural changes have taken place in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. As a result *Radical Believers* has undergone significant revision - in addition, a new chapter on 'Christian Believing' has been added.

*Radical Believers* was initially part of the Baptist Union's former 'Christian Training Programme' and was written to help Baptists understand why they are Baptist. Although the Christian Training Programme is no more, *Radical Believers* remains the basic textbook on Baptist identity for all students at Baptist Colleges seeking to become Baptist ministers. However, it is also designed to help people new to Baptist church life to understand more clearly the Baptist way of being church.

I am grateful to all those who have made suggestions of ways in which *Radical Believers* could be improved

# INTRODUCTION

## Returning to our roots

In ideal terms the Baptist way of being the church is God's way for his people to live their life together. I say "in ideal terms" because I recognise that Baptists never reach the ideal - through our own foolishness and sinfulness Baptists like their fellow Christians fail one another and fail their Lord. Nonetheless, this does not stop Baptists claiming that their study of God's Word has led them to believe that there is a pattern for their life together in Christ, and that the Baptist way of being the church is modelled on that pattern.

For many Baptists this may come as a surprise. For them being a Baptist is just one of many possible ways of being a Christian. Indeed, a good number of people join our churches not because they wish to become Baptists, but because they wish to become members of a particular church, which just happens to be Baptist. In the first place, they are not attracted by the church's ecclesiology, but by other factors, such as the preaching and teaching, the worship, the fellowship, the range of activities for children and young people. The Baptist way of being the church is secondary - if not irrelevant - to these other considerations.

This book, however, is written from the conviction that theology is important. Moreover, the expression of that theology (the way we think about God and associated themes) in terms of ecclesiology (our understanding of being the church) is important. The Baptist way of being the church is not just one of several options open to us. Our study of God's Word leads us to believe that this is God's way for living our life together. It is in this sense that Baptists are radical believers. For Baptists believe in getting back to the roots of the Christian faith (note that the English word 'radical' is derived from the Latin word '*radix*', which means 'root') - which in turn means that they seek to root their life together in the Word of God.

## Baptist Distinctives

Is there a specific Baptist way of being the church? There is an old joke that that for every hundred Baptists, there are a hundred different opinions! Certainly Baptists are not monochrome, with the result that a wide variety of views are to be found amongst Baptists. Yet for all their variety, Baptists do share a certain set of distinctives which make Baptists Baptist.

It is important to recognise that there is no one distinctive Baptist belief. So although probably most people think believers' baptism is the primary Baptist distinctive, Baptists are in fact not the only Christians to practise believers' baptism - believers baptism is practised by Pentecostals, the 'new churches', and many other Christian groups. Another key Baptist distinctive is their concept of congregational church government - however, as the term implies, this concept is shared too by Congregationalists (most of whom are now part of the United Reformed Church) and by some other Christian churches too. Likewise, other important Baptist distinctives such as the priesthood of all believers or the separation of church and state, are not peculiar to Baptists, but are shared by many other Christians too. It is, however, the combination of these various beliefs which makes Baptists distinctive. Baptist distinctives can be likened to a set of genes, which because of their arrangement produce a family likeness wherever Baptists are to be found.

Baptists tend to jump from the New Testament to the present day, forgetting that as heirs of the radical reformation they have a noble history. Baptists need to remember that it was they who championed the cause of religious freedom, spearheaded the modern missionary movement, and, along with other Christians, kept alive the evangelical flame of faith.

We begin our examination of Baptist distinctives by looking at **believers' baptism** with its emphasis on the need for personal faith in Christ. This commitment to Christ and his people in baptism also receives expression in **the Lord's Supper** - the other main ordinance of the church. This leads us on to look at how Baptists approach **worship**, with their emphasis on the preaching of the Word.

The Baptist way of being the church emphasises the importance of 'covenant' relationships: we therefore examine what commitment to God and to one another means in terms of **church membership**. Linked to church membership is the Baptist understanding of **authority**, with its emphasis on the **church meeting** as the place where with God's help all important decisions are made as together we discern the mind of Christ. In spite of this emphasis on the church meeting, Baptists do not believe in independency but inter-dependency: hence for them the importance of **associating** with other Baptists and with other Christians.

The last two distinctives high-lighted in this book relate to the Baptist understanding of **ministry**, with its emphasis on every-member-ministry; and the Baptist commitment to **mission**, with its emphasis on personal evangelism.

These distinctives together make Baptists Baptist. They are distinctives without which the wider church of God would be much the poorer, and to which therefore Baptists still need to bear witness.

## **Denominations Under Fire**

Is Baptist identity really still worth fighting for? Is it still important for Baptists to maintain their way of being the church? Some think not and are critical of denominations in general:

**'Denominations are counter to the will of God'**, say some independents. In a sense that is true. Nobody would pretend that a church divided into Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, together with a host of other groupings, is an expression of the perfect will of God. But the creation of independent non-denominational 'fellowships' or churches does not solve the problem. If anything, it increases the range of choice, and baffles even more the outsider.

**'Denominations have had their day'**, say some deeply committed to the ecumenical cause. But the interests of unity are not furthered by a disregard of Biblical truths which denominations have preciously safeguarded down through the centuries. It is increasingly recognised that unity in terms of uniformity is not an option. The way forward is to be found as the denominations recognise their unity in spite of their diversity.

**'Denominations have the hand of death on them'**, say others, as if the life of the Spirit is to be found in their churches and nowhere else. It is true that there are individual churches which are more dead than alive, but to write off entire

denominations on the basis of some of its churches is to grieve the Spirit. In all denominations there is life, and to pretend that only one group of churches contains the life of the Spirit is unjustified spiritual arrogance.

Others are critical of Baptists:

**‘Not all Baptist churches preach the Gospel’**, say some. So much depends on what we mean by ‘the Gospel’. In a way that is not true of other mainline churches, Baptists churches are largely ‘evangelical’. Some are less willing to dot ‘i’s and cross ‘t’s than others, but all of us recognise that God's truth is bigger than any of our perceptions. The fact is that believers’ baptism ensures that the concept of conversion is at the heart of every Baptist church.

**‘Not all Baptist churches are alive with the Spirit’**, say others. If by that is meant that not all Baptist churches ‘swing from the chandeliers’ in worship, then that is true. In many places, however, Baptist churches have been marked by a fresh openness to the Spirit, with resulting new life and growth. Honesty compels us to recognise that there are churches which appear to go through the motions, and no more. But experience has shown that where lively Christians are prepared to support energetically such churches, renewal and reformation is possible from within.

**‘Baptist churches have less evangelistic potential’**, say yet others, who join the state church where they believe there is a "bigger pond in which to fish". But is evangelistic pragmatism to count more than theological truth?

For most people the choice is not between differing denominations and theologies, but between individual churches and what those churches have to offer. People today who change denominations change less out of theological conviction, and more out of personal interest and convenience. It is the philosophy of the consumer society and its emphasis on choice which holds sway. People choose a church because of what it has to offer: its worship, teaching, and its range of activities. Theology and ecclesiology are relatively unimportant.

But matters relating to theology and ecclesiology are important - for both are an expression of Christian truth as revealed in Jesus, the living Word of God, and in the Scriptures, the written Word of God. Theological conviction - and not just personal convenience - has a role to play for the ‘Bible-believing’ Christian. The Bible is not just about personal faith, it is also about the corporate expression of that faith. At that point the Baptist way of being the church immediately becomes relevant, for it is a way of life rooted in Scripture. Radical believing is not the prerogative of the rugged individualist, it involves a corporate life together with the people of God. Baptists with their emphasis on the believers' church dare to believe that their way of being the church is consistent with God's pattern of life for his people as found within the pages of the New Testament.

No doubt there will always be valid pastoral reasons for individuals switching from a Baptist church to a church of another denomination, where they may receive the help and teaching they need. Generally such a switch is regrettable. If a Baptist church appears not to bear all the marks of a church that is alive and well, then surely the person who has entered into a covenant relationship with fellow Baptist believers should seek the renewal and reform of that church from within.

## A personal testimony

Let me conclude with a personal testimony. Although brought up within a Baptist home, I agreed to write this book on Baptist identity because I have become a Baptist by conviction. From a study of the Scriptures I am convinced that the Baptist way of being the church is God's pattern for his people's life together. This does not mean that either I or my fellow Baptists have always lived out that pattern. But by theological conviction expressed in baptism and church membership, this is the family to which I belong.<sup>1</sup>

Thank God, this covenant is no one way covenant. My experience is that as I have sought to honour this covenant, others have honoured their side of the covenant by their love and acceptance of me. It is therefore a family which on experiential grounds - as also on theological grounds - I delight to commend to others.

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<sup>1</sup> I am conscious that as I edit this third edition of *Radical Believers* I am no longer active in a Baptist church, but worship in Chelmsford Cathedral. The complex reasons behind this decision are outlined in my autobiography, *This is my Story: a story of life, faith and ministry*. In summary, when I retired it became clear that I could no longer worship in the church which I had led for 21 years. However, I have not become an Anglican – the Cathedral recognises that I remain a Baptist minister and in that spirit kindly put on a special service of Evensong on Sunday 11 October 2020 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination as a Baptist minister. My name is still included in the register of accredited ministers of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and technically I remain a ‘member’ of my former church. Until its closure in 2021 I was the chairman of the College of Baptist Ministers, and even now I continue to lead a fellowship for retired ministers in Mid-and South Essex, which I helped to found. Throughout my ministry I have belonged to the Baptist Ministers Fellowship. I am a ‘radical believer’!

## **1. CHRISTIAN BELIEVING**

### **Baptists are part of the wider church of God**

At the heart of all Baptist believing is Jesus. The crucified and risen Lord Jesus is our supreme article of faith. Compared with faith in Jesus, all our Baptist distinctives are as nothing. Baptists are first and foremost Christians, and only secondarily Baptists. Baptists everywhere would happily agree that it is more important to know Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord than to belong to any particular group of Christians.

*TO THINK ABOUT: John Bunyan, although baptised as a believer, was always impatient with titles emphasising distinctions among Christians. He wished to be known as a Christian. He wrote: "As for those titles of Anabaptists, Independents, Presbyterians or the like, I conclude that they came neither from Jerusalem nor Antioch, but rather from hell and Babylon for they naturally tend to divisions".*

Jesus is the one who unites Baptists not only with one another, but with all Christians everywhere. We are all "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28). From their earliest beginnings Baptists have never claimed to have an exclusive possession of saving truth: they have always acknowledged that they are only part of the world-wide universal Christian church. Although Baptists have not had a tradition of reciting the creeds in public worship, they have always regarded themselves as heirs of the creeds.

In this book on Baptist identity it is good to be able to begin by focussing on what all Christians have in common. We do so, first of all, by rooting our faith in the Scriptures, then by briefly highlighting two creeds from the early church, and finally by returning to the Scriptures with a declaration of faith drawn from a number of short Bible verses.

### **TWO NEW TESTAMENT CONFESSIONS OF FAITH**

#### **'Jesus is Lord'**

It was with these words that the first Christians were baptised; and later with these words on their lips that many were martyred for their faith. This confession of faith was almost certainly not of Paul's invention, but rather had already been formulated by the early church. From the beginning Christians proclaimed the lordship of the risen Jesus. It is probably no exaggeration to say that here we have the earliest Christian confession of faith.

In 1 Cor 12.3 Paul writes: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit". The mark of a Christian, of one possessing the Spirit of God, is the confession that 'Jesus is Lord'.

In Rom 10.9 Paul writes: "If you confess with your lips that 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved". Here Paul links the lordship of Jesus inextricably with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is the resurrection which is the basis for the lordship of Jesus. The lordship of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus are not two separate articles of faith, but one. In rising from the dead Jesus not only triumphed over death, but also over every power that can be named. The resurrection of Jesus does not simply offer hope of life to come, it also changes the course of the world. The risen Jesus is the risen Lord.

This emphasis on the lordship of Jesus is contained in the question traditionally asked in British Baptist churches of candidates as they have stood in the baptistery ready for baptism:

“Do you profess repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord?”

In the 1991 Baptist ‘guidebook for worship leaders’, *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship*, in addition to a lengthy declaration of faith, the suggestion is made that:

“As they emerge from the water the candidates may align themselves with the Church through the ages by making aloud the profession of faith:

Candidate:                    Jesus is Lord!

Congregation:        :        Hallelujah!”

### **Jesus is the Crucified and Risen Lord**

Another longer and early Christian confession of faith is found in 1 Cor 15.3-5, where Paul uses a form of words possibly taught him by Ananias as he was prepared for baptism.

"I handed on to you as of greatest importance what in turn I had received:  
that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures,  
and that he was buried,  
that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures,  
and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve."

For Paul here was the essence of the Christian faith - the ‘creed’ which Paul taught the Corinthians as being "of greatest importance" (v3).

Christian faith can never be totally systematised, for we are dealing with a God who is beyond all systematisation. Precisely because God's way and his thoughts are not our ways and thoughts, there will always be areas of uncertainty. We cannot dot all the 'i's and cross the 't's of faith. There will be times when we just don't know. However, there are basic issues on which certainty is not only possible, but necessary.

Of first importance and absolutely basic is that the Gospel centres on a death, viz. the death of Christ. At the beginning of his letter to the Corinthians Paul talks of the "message about the cross" (1 Cor 1.18), but the uniqueness of the death of Christ does not lie in the manner of his death. Thousands had been crucified before Christ died, just as thousands would be crucified after his death. Indeed, when Emperor Titus subdued a Jewish revolt, Josephus tells us that 'there was no space left for crosses, and insufficient crosses for all the bodies. The uniqueness of Christ's death lay in its purpose. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with Scriptures". We die because of our sins. As Paul later wrote to the Romans: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6.23). But Jesus died "for our sins". The death of Jesus was no act of heroic or exemplary love. Something happened when Jesus died. To use the jargon, Jesus died to make an 'atonement' for our sins - he died to make us "at one" with God. The death of Jesus is the only hope for sinful men and women.

Likewise of first importance and absolutely basic is that the Gospel centres on a life, viz. the risen life of Christ. Without the resurrection of Jesus the death of Jesus would have no

meaning and the cross would be devoid of its power. The Christ crucified whom Paul preached is the crucified and risen Lord. The uniqueness of the resurrection of Jesus does not lie just in his coming back to life, miraculous as that was. Jesus was no Lazarus, who came back to life only to die again. No, the uniqueness of the resurrection of Jesus lies in his having been raised to life and being alive for evermore. Jesus is alive, and will be for all eternity. Because he is alive, not only sin but also death has been dealt with forever. The resurrection of Jesus is the only hope for mortal men and women.

It is instructive that the one quotation from Scripture contained in the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain is taken from 1 Cor 15.3-4: "Christian baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'".

## **TWO CREEDS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH**

### **The Apostles' Creed**

At the first Congress of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905 the first President, Alexander Maclaren, asked the delegates to stand and say together the Apostles' Creed, which they duly did. Today, alas, few Baptists could do the same!

The Apostles' Creed almost certainly has its origin in baptismal classes when candidates for baptism were required to memorise this a statement of the Christian faith. This creed probably dates back to the early third century, although legend has it that each of the apostles contributed an article to this creed!

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
born of the Virgin Mary  
suffered under Pontius Pilate  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy universal Church,  
the communion of the saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen

## The Nicene Creed

The 'Nicene Creed' is the product of the Council of Constantinople in 381, but expresses the faith of the preceding Council in Nicea in 325. It was developed as a test of orthodoxy over against the heresy of Arius who taught - like today's Jehovah Witnesses - that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God. In the first-person plural ('we') the Nicene Creed defines the faith of the church; by contrast the Apostles Creed in the first-person singular ('I') defines the faith of the believer.

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For churches belonging to the Baptist Union of Great Britain the doctrine of the person of Christ was a matter of debate in the early 1970s. Over against an attempted contemporary re-stating of the Nicene Creed, the 1973 Baptist Assembly overwhelmingly reaffirmed its "wholehearted acceptance and belief" of its Declaration of Principle, in which "our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" is described as "God manifest in the flesh" - and added "understanding these words as expressing unqualified faith in His full deity and real humanity".

As with the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed is accepted as fundamental to Christian believing by all denominations. However, the Eastern ['Orthodox'] churches have always objected to the words "and the Son" in the third paragraph dealing with the Holy Spirit, with the result that this phrase is no longer found in 'ecumenical' versions of the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is,  
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate from the holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life.,

who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].  
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.  
he has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

## TWO SCRIPTURAL AFFIRMATIONS OF FAITH

Baptists have sometimes expressed their faith through putting together verses from the Bible. The following two Scriptural affirmations of faith were put together to be part of a modern Baptist covenant service ('Covenant 21'). Significantly, neither of these two affirmations contain distinctive 'Baptist' emphases. Both centre on Jesus.

### A Multi-scriptural Affirmation

This first Scriptural affirmation of faith was created by drawing together a number of short verses of Scripture. It can be used either as leader and congregation, or with the congregation in two parts, speaking to each other.

*Hear, O Israel, 'The Lord our God is one Lord'. (Deut 6.4)*  
*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1.1)*

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it (Ps 24.1)

*And God said to Moses, 'Say to all the people*  
*'You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy'. (Lev 19.2)*

He has told you what is good, and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6.8)

*And when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,*  
*to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of children. (Gal 4.4-5)*

And the Word became flesh and we saw his glory,  
the glory as of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1.14)

*Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news and saying,*  
*'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near,*  
*repent and believe the good news'. (Mark 1.14-15)*

And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and  
people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. (John 3.19)

*And when they had mocked Jesus, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes*  
*on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15.20)*

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,  
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5.21)

*But this Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (Acts 2.32)*

For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. (1 Cor 15.20)

*While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. (Luke 24.51)*

Therefore God also exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. (Phil 2.9)

*Jesus told them, 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you'. (John 16.7)*

Now the Lord is the Spirit,  
and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Cor 3.17)

*The body is one, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. (1 Cor 12.12)*

There is one body, and one Spirit  
just as you were called to one hope when you were called: -  
one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all,  
who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4.4-6)

*And all will have to give account to him  
who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Pet 4.5)*

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen 16.25)

*See, the home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them,  
they will be his people and God himself will be with them.*

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away (Rev 21.3-4)

## **An affirmation based on Colossians 1**

This affirmation has a preamble from Psalm 33.6, 8, but otherwise is based on Col 1.13-20. Most scholars believe that the heart of this passage (1.15-20) was an early Christian ‘hymn’, which Paul quoted in his letter. The lines of the hymn have been arranged a little differently from that found in ‘Covenant 21’ to bring out some of the parallelism present in these verses.

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth*

*Let all the earth fear the Lord;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.*

*He has rescued us from the power of darkness  
and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,  
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;  
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,  
things visible and invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -  
all things have been created through him and for him.

*He himself is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together.  
He is the head of the body, the Church*

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,  
so that he might come to have first place in everything.  
For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell,  
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
whether on earth or in heaven,  
by making peace through the blood of his cross

*TO THINK ABOUT:*

*What one Scripture sums up the Christian faith for you? John 3.16 or what?]*

## **A Baptist Confession of Faith for Today?**

Is there a place for a distinctive ‘Baptist’ confession of faith for today? Although Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were happy to produce confessions of faith, in recent years the Baptist Union leadership has become wary of producing a contemporary confession of faith, fearing it might become divisive rather than unifying. At a ‘Mainstream’ conference on Baptist identity in 1987 my father, George Raymond Beasley-Murray, begged to differ. Such a confession of faith, he maintained, was “desirable for God’s sake, for our sakes, for the sake of other Churches, and for the sake of the world”.

It was desirable for God’s sake, in so far as it would enable Baptists to “have an understanding of God by which their praise and thanksgiving may rise to genuine adoration”.

It was desirable for the sake of Baptists, because it “could transform the understanding of their faith which many people hold to be dead. It could also become an excellent basis for instructing new converts”. It was desirable for the sake of other Christians, because “there are surprising few members of other denominations who have a reasonable accurate knowledge of what Baptists believe”. And it was desirable for the sake of the world, in so far as it would help Christians to bear an effective witness to the Gospel. “Mission is supposed to be in our blood: it needs to be in our head and in our heart”.

He drew his address to a close with these words:

“A Confession of Faith for today ... does not need to have negative effects. They could be wholly positive when slanted in the direction of vision for action. We are not wanting a ten point creed corresponding to the Ten Commandments, to which signatures will be demanded from those who camp around the Baptist Mount Sinai! We belong to the city of God. We celebrate with our fellow-citizens beneath an open heaven in the presence of the God of glory and Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant.

We want to catch a fuller glimpse of the reality to which we belong. We need to let it inspire us to action in keeping with his new world of God’s kingdom. Theology is thinking and talking about God. It is dead only when it comes hundredth hand from dusty volumes that got it hundredth hand from even dustier libraries. Theology is done on our knees, our faces turned towards God, our ears attentive to hear from God’s Word and what the saints have learned from it. From that mountain top we can see the needy multitudes below. When this is done, visionary theological thinking becomes possible.”<sup>2</sup>

*TO THINK ABOUT:*

*What would you include in a ten-point statement of Christian believing?*

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<sup>2</sup> George Beasley-Murray, ‘Confessing Baptist Identity’ 84 in *A Perspective on Baptist Identity* (Mainstream Baptists for life and growth, 1987).

## 2. CONFESSING THE FAITH The Baptism of Believers Only

### THE CENTRALITY OF CONVERSION

A fun slogan on Christian tee-shirts used to be 'Baptists are wet all over!'. In the eyes of many, baptism by total immersion is the key Baptist distinctive - and hence the name. Although understandably it is the dramatic act of baptism which impresses itself upon the minds of visitors to our services, for Baptists it is the quality of faith - rather than the quantity of water - which ultimately counts. In the first place Baptists practise *believers'* baptism.

Unfortunately the emphasis on *believers'* baptism is sometimes misunderstood by other Christians, who speak of Baptists practising *adult* baptism over against infant baptism. This, however, is not an exact contrast. Baptists do not baptise adults *per se*. Many baptismal candidates are young people, who have yet to attain their formal majority. What counts is not age, but faith. Adults and young people alike are baptised - as believers.

A theology of conversion is at the heart of the Baptist understanding of baptism. Baptism expresses the believer's response of faith to the grace of God. Or to put it another way, on theological grounds it may be truer to say that believers' baptism stems from the Baptist model of a believers' church, and that in many ways it is the latter rather than the former which is our key distinctive. Thus, over against the great state churches of Europe, Baptists developed a radical model of the church, where faith in Jesus as expressed through baptism is the means of entry.

### THE BASIS FOR BAPTISM

Baptists frequently offer three reasons for their practice of baptism:

#### **The Command of Christ**

The first and ultimately the most powerful reason for baptism is found in the 'Great Commission'. Jesus, as he was about to ascend to his Father, declared:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28.18-20).

Jesus issues a command, whose validity does not expire until "the end of the age". Baptism is therefore no optional extra, but a rite ordained by Christ for all who would be his disciples.

The fact that we have here an objective command of Christ deals with the not infrequent objection raised by some that they do not yet 'feel' it right to be baptised. Baptism is not dependent upon feelings, it is an act of obedience. If we love Jesus, we will want to obey him, As Jesus said to his disciples: "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15.14). Baptism is a necessary part of discipleship.

The authenticity of Matt 28.18-20 has been questioned by some. However, the dictum of the distinguished New Testament scholar, Ethelbert Stauffer, should be noted:

"How this Christian practice of baptism originated is a puzzle that only begins to be solved if we come at last once more to conclude that the tradition of the Risen Lord giving a missionary charge is to be taken seriously".

Baptism, then, marks the beginning of our discipleship. 'Baptism' does not follow 'teaching', but rather 'teaching' follows 'baptism'. This does not do away with the Baptist practice of baptismal classes, where the significance of baptism is spelled out to the enquirer. It does, however, raise a question mark over any lengthy interval, perhaps of several years, between conversion and baptism. From a New Testament point of view, baptism is part of the conversion process. We are not fully committed to Jesus until we have committed ourselves to him in the waters of baptism.

### **The Example of Christ**

Popular thinking sometimes views Christ's example, in being baptised, as reinforcing his command (see Matt 3.13-17; Mark 1.9-11; Luke 3.21,22). It is argued that if Jesus himself was baptised, then so too should we be. Attention is drawn to the reply of Jesus to John: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness", or as the Good News Bible puts it, "for in this way we shall do all that God requires" (Matt 3.15).

However, the parallel is not as close as might initially appear. Jesus, described by Peter as like "a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Pet 1.19), did not submit himself to baptism to wash away his sins, but rather took his first step to the Cross by identifying himself with us in our *sinfulness*. By contrast we in baptism identify ourselves with Jesus in his *sinlessness*!

A better parallel is that we, like Jesus, must be prepared to submit ourselves to the will of God and "do what God requires". A further parallel may be that just as baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry, so too should our baptism mark the beginning of our service for God.

### **The practice of the Early Church**

A further basis for baptism is that the first Christians took this command of Jesus seriously. We see this on the day of Pentecost. Luke tells us that when the people heard Peter's sermon,

"They were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2.37,38).

Part of becoming a Christian is being baptised.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Should Baptists call people to be baptised at the same time as they make evangelistic appeals, calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ?*

As we examine the Acts of the Apostles, it becomes evident that baptism was an integral part of conversion.

- A large number of Samaritans (Acts 8.11-13) and later the Ethiopian finance minister (Acts 8.26-40) came to faith in Christ and were baptised by Philip.
- Paul was baptised by Ananias after meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9.10-18; 22.12-16).
- Cornelius and his friends were baptised by Peter, following the gift of the Spirit (Acts 10.44-48).
- Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, (Acts 16.13-15) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16.25-34) were both baptised by Paul as part of their response to the Christian gospel, as also Crispus and many of his fellow Corinthians (Acts 18.8).
- Paul baptised the Ephesian disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19.1-7), after they had come to a clearer understanding of Jesus.

Baptism was part of the process of becoming a Christian. In New Testament times there was no such person as an unbaptised Christian. Otherwise Paul could not have written: "We were all baptised" (1 Cor 12.13). The only exceptions were the apostles, who had probably only known the baptism of John and were in this way one with their Lord

#### *TO THINK ABOUT*

*In the light of the close links between baptism and conversion in the early church, should we expect to see people baptised on the day they come to faith? Do Baptists need to become more radical in their approach to Scripture on this matter?*

*What are the arguments for and against a lengthy period, maybe several weeks or months, of instruction before baptism?*

*In living memory in Congo (Zaire), candidates had to be able to read before being baptised. Why do you think this practice was adopted and was it a good practice?*

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM**

Baptism is multi-faceted, and is rich in symbolism. From a New Testament perspective it can be said to have a fivefold meaning:

#### **A Declaration of Union with Christ**

Baptism is a dramatic way of declaring our solidarity with Jesus, crucified and risen. It is the moment when a believer expresses his or her union with Christ. Paul put it this way:

"Do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6.3.4: similarly Col 2.12).

The imagery here is a watery grave in which baptismal candidates, as they go under the water, identify themselves with the Christ who died for them, and as they come up out of the water, they identify themselves with the Christ who rose with them. In baptism they are in effect saying - "Yes Lord, you died for me"; "Yes Lord, you rose for me".

But baptism is far more than a credal statement. It has ethical implications also: baptism is a dying to the old way of living, and a rising to Christ's new way of living. To declare solidarity with Christ and in this way to identify with him and with him alone, is a revolutionary act. It is an acknowledgement of the lordship of Christ, come hell or high water. To die to self is to die to the old way of living. It is to turn from sin and to renounce evil. Baptism is more than a mere act of obedience. It involves total surrender to Christ. What is more, this surrender is a surrender of a lifetime. From this point there is to be no going back.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Is the revolutionary nature of what you commit yourself to in believers' baptism a good reason for allowing time for instruction and preparation before you make the 'surrender of a lifetime'? If you have been baptised, does your own experience of baptism help you to answer this question?*

All this is symbolised in baptism. It is this understanding of dying and rising with Christ which demands total immersion. Even the Church of England recognises that the mode of baptism is in the first instance 'dipping' and only as a fall back 'pouring'. In the Orthodox tradition the Biblical symbolism is retained and babies are immersed in the font.

Baptists differ in how they immerse. Most commonly candidates are taken backwards into the water as a sign of burial. In parts of Africa candidates are baptised by being plunged down into the water - a meaningful symbol where people are buried vertically! An alternative mode is to have candidates kneel in the water, and then take them forwards as a sign of their submission to Christ.

### **A Sign of Cleansing**

Another Scriptural way of approaching baptism is to see it as a 'bath', in which our sins are washed away. This symbolism, present too in the form of baptism practised by John the Baptist, is found in a number of Scripture passages.

**Acts 22.16:** Ananias said to Paul: "And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptised and have your sins washed away, calling on his name" (Acts 22.16). The link between the "washing" and the "calling on the name of Jesus" is significant: the water alone does not cleanse.

**Eph 5.26:** We find in this passage a similar link between "washing" and "the word", although it is not clear whether "the word" refers to the preaching of the Gospel or a confession of faith.

**Titus 3.5:** Paul describes baptism as "the water (or 'washing') of rebirth". In another of his 'Pastoral Letters' Paul quotes an early Christian baptismal hymn which emphasises the need for those who have "died" with Christ in baptism to "endure" in the faith (2 Tim 2.11-13).

**Heb 10.22:** The writer exhorts his readers to "approach [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water". The external cleansing is a sign of an internal cleansing.

**1 Pet 1.3-5; 3.21:** As Peter makes clear, it is not the water itself which removes the "dirt" of

this life, but rather "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" who in his mercy gives "new birth" to those who respond in faith to his grace through baptism. "Baptism now saves you - not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal [or pledge] to God for a good conscience toward God", or as the Good News Bible puts it, "as the promise made to God from a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ".

All of us need to be made clean by the blood of Jesus (see 1 John 1.8,9). Strangely one sometimes comes across people who delay their baptism on the ground that they are not yet good enough for God - as if baptism is some special sign of Christian maturity. The reverse is the case. In baptism we acknowledge that we are *not* good enough - that we stand in need of Christ's cleansing power. The moment we think we are good enough for God, that moment we are not fit to be baptised. Baptism is for sinners - albeit penitent sinners - only.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Caroline, Alison and Kevin were fielding questions at the youth group after a service of believers' baptism. The service had made a big impression on the young people. Some of them hadn't been to such a service before, so the questions and comments came thick and fast. Josh, who had been attending the evening service for several months, finally got a word in: "I couldn't do what they did tonight. To start with, I'm not good enough to be baptised. Perhaps I will one day, when I'm good enough." If you were Caroline, Alison or Kevin, how would you reply to Josh?*

### **A Confession of Faith**

When Paul wrote "If you confess with your lips 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom 10.9), he almost certainly had the act of baptism in mind. For in New Testament terms baptism is the great moment when Christians nail their colours to the mast and declare they belong to Christ and to his people. Thus it is generally agreed that Paul is referring to baptism when he writes to Timothy: "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Tim 6.12).

Most Baptists feel happiest with this aspect of baptism. Baptism is often viewed first and foremost as an act of witness. It is customary in many Baptist churches for baptismal candidates to give 'testimonies' to God's saving power in their own lives: for although baptism itself is a confession of faith, it is good to give opportunity for candidates to elaborate on this confession and to tell of what Christ means to them. Again, it is customary in many Baptist churches for the candidates to invite friends and relatives to their baptism, to share their testimony beyond the church. Baptism can never be a private affair.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*It could be argued that modern baptisteries are an unfortunate compromise: a river or lake is so much more public! Do you agree? Do you know of anyone coming to faith through seeing somebody baptised or confessing his or her faith in a testimony?*

### **A rite of initiation**

From a New Testament perspective baptism is the door into the church. 1 Cor 12.13 leads clearly to this conclusion: "For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body". Similar

thinking underlies Gal 3.26-28, where Paul's mention of faith leads him on to baptism which in turn leads him on to speak of the church:

"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The word 'church' may be missing, but a sense of Christian community into which believers' baptism leads is very much present. In baptism we commit ourselves to Christ and to the people of Christ.

Sadly many British Baptists have not always seen baptism as a rite of initiation. They have individualised the rite to such an extent that sometimes it is an act of witness and nothing more. In some English Baptist churches it is possible to be baptised, and yet not become a church member. Baptists need to reform their baptismal practice and ensure that only in exceptional cases - for example, where someone from a church practising infant baptism wishes to be baptised as a believer, and yet at the same time wishes to remain a member of that church - would it be possible to be baptised without becoming a member of the church. Baptism is a *church* ordinance - it is not for spiritual gypsies.

*TO THINK ABOUT.....*

*What steps could be taken by your church to ensure that a new Christian does not think of baptism as merely an individual act of witness?*

*Some Baptist churches emphasise that baptism is the door of the church by following baptism immediately with the Lord's Supper, at which the candidates are received into membership. What arguments support or cast doubt on this practice?*

*What benefits come from unbelieving friends being present as the Lord's Supper as well as the baptism? Are there any practical or other disadvantages?*

### **A Sign of the Spirit's Presence**

The Spirit is God's gift to all who put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour and their Lord. Paul likens the Spirit to God's stamp of ownership, God's down-payment with a promise of more to come:

"When you...had believed, [you] were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people" (Eph 1.13,14).

As in baptism we express our trust in Jesus as our Saviour and our Lord, it is not surprising that baptism is associated with the gift of God's Spirit.

This association with the Spirit is seen in Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost:

"Repent, and be baptised every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.38).

The Spirit is clearly linked with baptism, and is consequent upon baptism. A similar link

between baptism and the Spirit is found in the writings of Paul.

- To the Corinthians Paul wrote, "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 6.11), indicating that the Spirit is active not only in the process of sanctification and justification, but also in baptism.
- This same activity of the Spirit in baptism is mentioned by Paul in his letter to Titus: God "saved us... through the water (or 'washing') of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3.5).
- Hence Paul can write: "We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor 12.11). Baptism, from a New Testament perspective, is a believer's personal Pentecost.

Yet is the Spirit always associated with baptism? In the Acts of the Apostles we read of two occasions when the gift of the Spirit is distinguished from baptism. But these instances are exceptional, in so far as they mark two new stages in the church's mission as the Gospel crosses over first to the Samaritan world, and then to the Gentile world.

- On the first occasion the Samaritans, whom Philip had been baptised, did not receive the Spirit until Peter and John arrived to pray for them. The gift of the Spirit was delayed until the official leaders of the church had acknowledged that even despised Samaritans could belong to the new people of God (Acts 8.14-17).
- On the second occasion the Spirit falls on Cornelius and his friends before they are baptised, with the result that Peter concludes that they should be baptised precisely because they have already received the Spirit "just as we have" (Acts 10.46-48). God in his sovereign grace shows that even Gentiles can belong to his church.

Both the 'Samaritan Pentecost' and the 'Gentile Pentecost' are exceptional, and are not normative for Christian experience, but in different ways they testify to the inalienable link between conversion and baptism.

From a New Testament perspective, then, it can be said that baptism marks a twofold commitment: for not only do we commit ourselves to God in response to his love for us expressed in Jesus, but God in his grace further commits himself to us through his Spirit. Baptism is a sign of the Spirit's presence.

### **Baptism a Sacrament?**

Traditionally Baptists have been wary of anything that suggests that God may be active in baptism. Baptists are happy to speak of symbolism, but are suspicious of 'sacramentalism'. Any link with the Spirit is often denied and the term 'sacrament' avoided.

But what is a sacrament? A sacrament has been defined as "an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace". The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches have applied the term to the seven rites of baptism, confirmation, the Lord's Supper, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. The Protestant churches have restricted the term to baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptists used to avoid using the word sacrament because of its association at times with semi-

magical ideas. Henry Cook, for instance, a Baptist stalwart of an earlier generation, charged that for 'sacramentalists'

"Baptism and the Lord's Supper were changed into mysterious rites that produced supernatural effects in those who received them, whether they had any personal faith or no".

He preferred the use of the traditional Baptist term 'ordinance' for baptism and the Lord's Supper, as rites which had been 'ordained' or laid down by our Lord (see Matt 28.19; 1 Cor 11.24,25).

Although Henry Cook's position was typical of most Baptists, a growing number believe that it is not good enough to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper as rites which merely 'symbolise'. They are rites in which the Spirit may be active - provided that faith is present (no Baptist would accept that baptism and the Lord's Supper may have meaning where faith is absent - that is to enter the realm of magic and superstition).

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Baptism has been described as 'a God-appointed rendezvous'. What does the phrase mean to you, and is it helpful in describing what happens in believers' baptism?*

### **Baptism with the Laying on of Hands**

British Baptists in rediscovering this association of baptism with the Spirit, are bringing back the old Baptist practice of accompanying baptism with prayer and the laying on of hands. The purpose of the prayer is to invoke the Spirit to confirm the unity of the baptised with Christ and fill the candidate with fresh power for witness and service.

Customs vary as to when this rite is carried out. It can take place in the waters of baptism, after the baptism itself. This gives a sense of immediacy. The disadvantage is that the candidate may still be recovering from having been dipped under the water. For that reason in some churches prayer for the Spirit is made immediately before baptism. In other churches candidates are given time to change into dry clothes, and then are prayed for. In yet other churches it is part of the reception into membership at the next celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### **The Baptism of the Holy Spirit**

As a result of charismatic renewal many Baptists became interested in the 'baptism of (or in) the Holy Spirit'. Pentecostals teach that the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' is a second stage experience inevitably evidenced by speaking in tongues. There is, however, no Scriptural justification for such a doctrine. True, John the Baptist spoke of Jesus as the one who would 'baptise' with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33), but this prophecy received general fulfilment on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2.33), and continues to receive fulfilment each time a person comes to faith in Christ.

The only place in the New Testament letters where this metaphor is found is in 1 Cor 12, where Paul links the reception of the Spirit with (water) baptism: "In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (1 Cor 12.13). There baptism is "into" Christ and "into" the Body

of Christ, and is the sign of initiation into Christ and into the Body. Paul also makes clear that the "baptising" Spirit bestows many and various gifts - to highlight one gift and then to suggest it should be universal in nature, runs directly counter to the teaching of 1 Cor 12.

This is not to deny the reality of charismatic experience, but rather to challenge charismatic terminology. From a Scriptural point of view, the challenge of the Christian life is not so much the baptism as the 'fulness' of the Spirit. Thus Paul in Eph 5.18 urges us to "be [keep on being] filled with the Spirit". In our living we should constantly be seeking to be opening up ourselves to the presence and power of God's Spirit.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*In the New Testament faith, baptism and the Spirit together with the grace of God form a four-stranded cord, which should not be divided. What practical implications arise from this understanding of baptism? Why do you either support or oppose the term 'sacrament' in reference to baptism and the Lord's Supper?*

## **BAPTISM IS FOR BELIEVERS ONLY**

Baptists have always maintained that baptism is for believers only. However, as a courtesy to our 'paedobaptist' (i.e. those who baptise young children) brothers and sisters, who after all form the majority of Christians today, we should look at the arguments for infant baptism:

### **Household Baptism**

In ancient society the solidarity of the family was more strongly stressed than ours. In Acts 11.14 (Cornelius); 16.15 (Lydia); 16.33 (the Philippian jailer); 18.3 (Crispus); and 1 Cor 1.16 (Stephanas) we read of so-and-so and their "household" being baptised. This, paedobaptists argue, naturally includes husband, wife and all the children.

However, the paedobaptist case is weakened once we recognise that in the first century the family extended considerably beyond parents and children to include cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents. Slaves were also included in the family and they formed more than half the population of the Roman empire. To assume that the term "household" or "family" immediately refers to little children, and even to infants, is to interpret the New Testament in terms of the Western nuclear family.

If we begin to look at some of the references to the "house" or "family" with young children in mind, the case for infant baptism becomes very weak.

- Look at the story of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16.30-34): "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?", asked the jailer. "Believe in the Lord Jesus", replied Paul and Silas, "and you will be saved, you and your household". Luke tells us that "They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.... then he and his entire family were baptised without delay" (Acts 16.33). If "his entire the family" included young children, then we must believe that the young children not only listened to Paul and Silas (it was gone midnight), but also put their trust in God!
- A similar situation is found in Acts 10.44-46 and 11.14, which shows that *all* the house of Cornelius heard the word, received the Spirit, spoke in tongues and were

baptised: are we to believe that little children were involved in all this?

- In Acts 18.8 we read that Crispus and all his family *believed* and were baptised.
- In 1 Cor 16.15,16 Paul urged submission to the household of Stephanas - surely this does not include children?

### **Jesus Welcomed Children**

In the Gospels (Mark 10.13-16 // Matt 19.13-15) Jesus commands his disciples not to hinder the children from coming to him, and gives his blessing to those who came. The kingdom of heaven belonged to them, he said. This, paedobaptists argue, would therefore make it very strange to exclude children from baptism.

Yet this does not establish the paedobaptist case. Baptists do not doubt the love of Jesus for children and his desire to welcome them. But Jesus declared that children were models of how mature people should *receive* the Kingdom: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10.15). It is childlike faith which Jesus here holds before us. This is no model for infant baptism, where children are entirely passive (unless they squawk!) - in no way do they actively receive Christ.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*If infant baptism encourages a complacency amongst people that they are already Christians, without having to make a personal response of repentance to God and faith in Jesus, does our stress on believers' baptism leave us weak in understanding where children from Christian families fit into the life of a local Baptist church? How can Baptists express more effectively God's concern for children and find a place for them in the believing community?*

### **Proselyte Baptism**

When a Gentile man was converted to Judaism (and so became a 'proselyte'), he was required to be circumcised and baptised, and his family also submitted to initiatory rites. Baptism became important, since women and girls received it also. Some assume that the early church applied baptism in much the same way, baptising all the family, children included! However, there is genuine uncertainty as to whether proselyte baptism was widely known in the time of the apostles. It would seem that it was John the Baptist who provided the model for the baptismal practice which Jesus adopted.

Some think 1 Cor 7.14 reflects a Christian parallel to proselyte baptism, since there Paul writes of children being "made holy" by the faith of a parent. However, Paul also refers to the unbelieving spouse being "made holy" - it is unlikely that the unbelieving spouse was baptised! Furthermore, the Jews used the expression "made holy" only of children born after conversion to the Jewish faith, and no baptism was then required to make the children Jewish. Clearly Paul did not apply the custom of proselyte baptism to Christian baptism.

### **Covenant and Circumcision**

Under the old covenant children born to Jewish parents were received as of right into the community almost immediately after birth. They belonged to the covenant people, the sign of which was circumcision. Under the new covenant, it is argued, children of Christian parents

should be similarly received as of right into the community, and they should receive the sign of this - baptism, which has now replaced circumcision.

There is no evidence, however, that the early church viewed baptism as applied to children of Christians in the same way as circumcision was used to mark Jewish children as children of the covenant. On the contrary, Paul opposes baptism and faith to circumcision and the law:

"The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Gal 3.24-27).

That baptism was not seen as replacing circumcision is seen from Acts 21.21 where James and the elders of the Jerusalem church speak of the Jewish churches' right to continue the rite of circumcision.

Finally, in Col 2.11 the phrase "the circumcision of Christ" does not refer to baptism but to the death of Christ - a terrible picture because to Jews circumcision was, with the Passover, the greatest of all sacrifices. Christians do not need it, says Paul, since the great sacrifice was offered for them, the power of which they know through conversion and baptism:

"In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2.11,12).

### **Baptism and the Grace of God**

One final argument relating to infant baptism needs to be considered. Infant baptism, it is sometimes maintained, glorifies the grace of God and reminds us that we are not saved because of our faith, but through the gracious action of God in Christ. It is said that to insist on the presence of faith in the baptised is tantamount to denying grace and perverting the Gospel!

But this argument does not do justice to the New Testament understanding of baptism. Baptism is the believer's response to the grace of God. Baptists with their Calvinistic heritage recognise that it is by grace that we have been saved, but "through faith" (Eph 2.8). Believers' baptism is no denial of the grace of God, but involves rather a joyful acceptance of that grace. Believers' baptism is the place where God's grace meets with our faith.

The faith in question is the faith of the one being baptised. God's gift of grace cannot be received on behalf of another. A personal response has to be made. Infant baptism, far from exalting the grace of God, makes a nonsense of the New Testament teaching of salvation.

### **Conclusion**

The 'paedobaptist' position fails to hold water. Nowhere does the New Testament implicitly assume that young children were baptised. The reverse is the case: it is explicitly stated that *believers* were baptised. Time and time again faith and baptism are clearly linked. Clear

references to believers' baptism are found, for example, in the following:

- Peter's appeal on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2.38: "Repent, and be baptised every one of you").
- The Samaritan response to Philip's preaching (Acts 8.12: "When they believed... they were baptised").
- Peter's explanation of baptism's "saving" power (1 Pet 3.21: "baptism... now saves you also - not as the removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience").
- In Gal 3.26,27 the statement "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" is immediately followed by a reference to baptism: "As many of you as were baptised into Christ Jesus have clothed yourselves with Christ".
- In Col 2.12 the recipients of Paul's letter expressed their faith in Christ: "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead".

Even if we do not include the reading of the Western text in Acts 8.37 (where, in answer to the Ethiopian's question, "What is to prevent me from being?", Philip replies: "If you believe with all your heart, you may"), the case is clear enough. Baptism is always accompanied by conscious faith. The theology of baptism in the New Testament always presumes the baptism of believers.

From a Scriptural perspective the practice of infant baptism is indefensible. Infant baptism arose not from a desire to obey Scripture, but from a concern for the salvation of babies and young children who die without an opportunity to respond in baptism to the grace of God. From a Baptist perspective, this concern is misplaced. The eternal welfare of those who die young is not dependent upon whether or not they have submitted to a rite of the church. God in his love and in his justice will not condemn those who die before the age of discretion, but rather will surely gather all such to himself. To presume that baptism apart from faith can save is to indulge in unhelpful superstition.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*In some Baptist churches in the USA children as young as six years old who profess faith in Jesus are baptised. What considerations determine the lowest age at which your church will normally baptise believers?*

## **BAPTISM IN AN ECUMENICAL SETTING**

### **One Baptism**

If baptism is for believers only, then how are we to regard those who have been baptised as children? Baptists generally maintain that baptism without faith on the part of the individual being baptised - whether a child or an adult - is not baptism at all. Baptism without faith has as much validity as a bigamous marriage - in neither case have the necessary preconditions been fulfilled. There is only "one baptism" - and that is baptism where "one Lord" is confessed by "faith" in the waters of baptism (Eph 4.4).

In today's ecumenical climate this approach sounds hard-line, if not intransigent. Some want

Baptists to recognise infant baptism as an alternative rite to believers' baptism - pointing out that infant baptism is accompanied by the faith of the godparents, and followed up with faith at the time of confirmation. Most Baptists, however, would still have difficulties. They are very willing to accept their paedobaptist brothers' and sisters' standing in Christ - they cannot, however, accept their practice in this matter.

## **Open Membership**

Over against the vast majority of other Baptist groups, most British Baptists are prepared to make one concession towards other Christians and that is in their practice of 'open membership'. In many English Baptist churches, it is not necessary to have been baptised as a believer to become a member. This practice, which goes right back to the time of John Bunyan, is, however, operated in a number of ways.

Some churches operate their open membership scheme on an 'indiscriminate' basis, and accept any unbaptised Christians into membership, whether or not they have been previously members of a particular church.

Most open membership Baptist churches will only accept into membership 'unbaptised' Christians (i.e. not baptised as believers) who have already been in good standing with another church and who, for one reason or another, do not feel able in all good conscience to be baptised as believers. The way to membership for new Christians who have come to faith within the church is through baptism.

This may seem a strange compromise, but there are theological grounds for this practice. If baptism is a 'rite of initiation', then the baptism of those who have been Christians for a good number of years and who have been in good standing with another Christian church would not totally reflect the conversion-baptism practised by the churches of the New Testament!

## **The Baptism of the 'Initiated'**

If in the New Testament baptism always has the newly converted in view, what should be our approach to people of mature Christian faith who request baptism? Although most Baptist ministers are happy to baptise people at whatever stage they are at, some have questioned the validity of the baptism of those who have been Christians for many years.

However, in spite of the very clear differences between the baptism of a new Christian and the baptism of a mature Christian, the baptism of the latter still reflects a good deal of the teaching of the New Testament about baptism.

- Baptism, whenever it takes place, is an act of obedience. It is not an optional extra. It is a clear command of the Risen Christ.
- In baptism we follow in the footsteps of Christ, who at the age of thirty was baptised. Just as his baptism marked not the beginning of his commitment to his Father's will, but a new stage of commitment, so too there is a parallel to the baptism of people of mature faith, who are entering upon a fresh stage of commitment to their Lord.
- Baptism is a moment of total surrender to Christ, as in the water we express our resolve to die to self and to live for Christ alone. Most new Christians have little

idea at the time of their baptism of the full implications of the lordship of Christ on their lives. Baptism for a person of mature faith can have all the connotations of full surrender - it is for them an occasion when they open the door of their hearts wide to the Risen Christ (Rev 3.20).

- Baptism in the New Testament is always associated with the activity of the Spirit. This is true of the new convert. It is also true of the Christian of mature faith. For God does not limit the giving of his Spirit to the beginnings of the journey of faith. God is generous and is constantly giving of his Spirit to those who open their lives to him, at whatever stage of the journey of faith they may be. In their admittedly belated baptism in water many Christians of mature years experience a new baptism of the Spirit. This is not surprising, because it is precisely when we truly surrender our lives to Jesus, that we are most open to receive from him.
- Baptism provides an opportunity for Christians to declare to their friends and family their faith in the Lord Jesus. When Christians of mature faith confess their faith, they can also testify to the faithfulness of God over the years in a way that cannot be true of a new Christian.

A good case for baptising people of mature faith can be made on the basis of the New Testament understanding of baptism. Such a baptism can be rich in meaning and can at the same time richly bless the individual being baptised. There is a place for the baptism of the initiated.

### **Believers' Baptism Without Immersion**

A different problem is posed by those who have been baptised as believers, but not by total immersion. Is baptism without immersion baptism? How are we to regard those who, for instance, who have come to faith within the Anglican church and have been baptised by 'sprinkling'? Or what about the candidates who has a genuine fear of water or as a major physical problem which makes immersion impossible?

Although the symbolism of baptism naturally demands immersion, the distinctive aspect of the Baptist approach to baptism is not the quantity of water, but the quality of faith. If a choice has to be made, then the emphasis must be upon "*believers' baptism*" rather than on "*baptism by immersion*". This understanding of baptism has allowed many Baptists to accept as valid the baptism of those baptised without immersion. Indeed, it is an interesting fact of history that for a few years one early group of Baptists practised baptism by affusion!

## **BAPTISM AND CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE**

Baptism has ethical implications. According to Paul in Rom 6.24 to be baptised is to die to the old way of living and to rise to a new way of living. The logic of this is that Christians may not "continue in sin" and "go on living in it" (Rom 6.1,2); for the new life in Christ witnessed to in the waters of baptism inevitably entails a new lifestyle.

Baptism is far more than a 'mere' one-off act of obedience; it involves life-long commitment to the way of Christ. Hence it is desirable for prospective baptismal candidates to think through carefully the implications of their baptism. The parables of the Tower Builder and the Warring King (Luke 14.28-33) are relevant here. Christian discipleship, of which baptism is the sign, is costly. In today's society it means going against the stream. As Jesus said, "If

any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8.34).

In practical terms, this means that to be baptised is to adopt the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount. It means, for instance, saying no to sex outside marriage (Matt 5.27-30); opting out of the rat-race and putting Christ before one's career (Matt 6.24). It means turning our back on the world and the world's values. To be baptised is to be a non-conformist in the truest sense of the word.

A nonconformist, however, is not an individualist. To be baptised involves not only commitment to Christ but also to his people (see 1 Cor 12.13). This corporate dimension to baptism also has ethical overtones. It means, for instance, that we may no longer look only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil 2.4). It means that sharing with God's people who are in need as also practising hospitality (Rom 12.13) come to the top of our agenda.

Like marriage, baptism is not to be undertaken "carelessly, lightly, or selfishly, but reverently, responsibly, and after serious thought". Baptism is more than a momentary confession of the faith - it involves a lifetime commitment to the way of Christ, a lifetime commitment to nonconformity. The ethical implications are enormous. In this sense Baptists are radical believers.

*TO THINK ABOUT.....*

*How in practice can our church keep believers alert to the ethical and lifestyle implications of baptism? Does it help if you mark annually the anniversary of your baptism and the vows you made?*

### **3.BREAKING BREAD AND DRINKING WINE** **Baptists celebrate the Lord's Supper**

#### **THE CENTRALITY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER**

Central to the worship life of the Christian church has been the celebration of the Lord's Supper. On the whole, the church has taken seriously the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: "This do in remembrance of me". This was certainly true of the New Testament church.

It is significant that Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11.17-34) is given in a context where he is speaking of what takes place when the Corinthians "come together as a church" (1 Cor 11.18).

Likewise, in Acts 20.7, it would appear that, at Troas at least, the Lord's Supper was celebrated once a week: "On the first day of the week", records Luke, "we came together to break bread".

Furthermore, Acts 2.46 seems to imply that for the Jerusalem church "breaking of bread", when presumably the Lord's death was remembered, was a daily occurrence.

Although Baptists recognise that the Lord's Supper is an 'ordinance', laid down by the Lord Jesus, in comparison with most mainline churches, the Lord's Supper is not central to most Baptist worship. Although there are exceptions, the Lord's Supper is not celebrated every Sunday in Baptist churches. Among British Baptists the Lord's Supper is normally held twice a month, and among other Baptist groupings it is even less frequent: in some Baptist churches in the USA the Lord's Supper is celebrated only once a year - on Maundy Thursday.

#### *TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Is the Lord's Supper 'central' to the worship of your church? Has your church got it right concerning the frequency with which the Lord's Supper is celebrated?*

*Are there strong arguments for the case that if Baptists wish to treat the Scriptures as normative, then they need to reform their communion practice?*

#### **THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE PASSOVER MEAL**

From the Gospels it is clear that the Last Supper was a Passover meal (see, for example, Mark 14.12-16). It is difficult to discuss the meaning of Lord's Supper and how it should be celebrated, without first understanding how the Passover was celebrated.

At the time of Jesus there were four stages to a Passover meal:

##### **The Preliminary Course**

- **Cup 1: the 'Kiddush' cup** (the cup of 'consecration') over which a blessing was said and thanks given to God for the feast. Probably this was Luke's 'first' cup: "Then Jesus took a cup, gave thanks to God and said: 'Take this and divide it among yourselves, for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes'" (Luke 22.17)
- **Hors d'oeuvre**: a preliminary dish, consisting of green herbs, bitter herbs and a

sauce made of fruit purée: see Exodus 12.8

- **The main course was served**, but not eaten: the 2nd cup put in its place, but not drunk

### The Passover Liturgy

- **The Passover ‘haggadah’** (‘proclamation’). The youngest person present would ask: “Why is this night different from other nights? For on all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread, but on this night only unleavened bread. On all other nights we eat any kind of herbs, but on this night only bitter herbs. On all other nights we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, but on this night only roasted”. This formed the cue for the head of the family to say: “A wandering Aramean was my father” (Deut 26.5), and beginning with Abraham he would tell the story down to the deliverance of the Passover. See 1 Cor 11.26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you *proclaim* the Lord’s death until he comes”.
- **The Hallel** (‘Praise God’) **Part I** = Psalms 113 & 114
- **Cup 2: the ‘Haggadah’ cup** (the cup of ‘proclamation’).

### The Main Meal

- **Grace spoken over the unleavened bread**: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who brings forth fruit from the earth. Blessed are you who have sanctified us with your commandment, and commanded us to eat unleavened cakes”. The bread was broken and distributed. See Mark 14.22: “While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to them”.
- **The Main Meal**: Passover Lamb, unleavened bread & bitter herbs
- **Grace spoken over Cup 3: the cup of ‘Blessing’** (see 1 Corinthians 10.16: “*The cup of blessing that we bless*”; also 1 Cor 11.25: “After supper”). “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who have created the fruit of the vine”.

### The Conclusion

- **The Hallel** (‘Praise God’) **Part II** = Psalms 115-118. See Mark 14.26: “Then they sang a *hymn* and went out to the Mount of Olives”.
- **Cup 4: the ‘Hallel’ cup** for which praise given

The Last Supper was like a formal dinner, with roast lamb and all the trimmings, together with four formal ‘toasts’. The early church in its celebration of the Lord’s Supper initially retained this meal element - it was only later abuse which caused the meal to disappear, Today only a sparrow would be satisfied with the bread and the wine we now offer! What was intended to be a corporate event has become individualised. Indeed, some speak of ‘*making my communion*’, as if communion is simply something between them and their Lord.

Other things to notice are

- At the Last Supper there were four separate occasions when a cup of wine was passed round in silence and a solemn sip was taken. The ‘**cup of blessing**’ (see 1 Cor 10.16) over which Jesus added his words of interpretation was the third cup.
- The meal was not eaten until after there had been a solemn recitation of the events leading up to the first Passover and of how God had freed his people from slavery. Similarly when the first Christians gathered to break bread and to drink wine they would have recited the story of how God in Christ had set his people free. This is what is behind the words of Paul: “Every time you eat this bread and drink from

this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes". It is not the eating and drinking which proclaim, but the telling of the story of our salvation. If we are to continue to "proclaim the Lord's death" in this context, then this means that the Lord's Supper must always presuppose the preaching of the word, however long or brief that word might be.

- There were two separate 'graces' spoken by Jesus over the bread and over the 'cup of blessing'. In some Baptist churches there are still two prayers of thanksgiving, in others only one. Which is more Scriptural? Two might appear best, since our Lord is recorded as having given thanks twice; but if he and his disciples observed the normal Passover routine, there would have been four prayers of thanksgiving!
- There was a good deal of singing. After the 'sermon', two Psalms were sung - then after the meal a further four psalms were sung. Although at the Lord's Table there is a place for quiet meditation; there must also be a place for joyful celebration as we remember the victory that God has gained for us in Christ.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Although there is no definitive Baptist statement, it would be true to say that for Baptists the Lord's Supper is a multi-faceted event:

### **A Memorial Meal**

Baptists have always viewed the Lord's Supper as a memorial meal, and based their interpretation on the words of Jesus: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11.24, 25). In eating bread and drinking wine we remember Jesus, and in particular remember him in relation to his death. Inevitably this lends a solemn aspect to the Lord's Supper as we focus on the crucified Saviour of Calvary. Not only do we remember his sufferings, we remember that it was for our sake that he hung and suffered there.

It is this act of remembering which causes us to be thankful. As we remember our sins, we remember too that "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1.7). To eat the bread and drink the wine is to receive afresh the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins. Here is the glory of the Cross. However much we may have failed and however far we may have fallen, in Jesus there is always a new beginning for those who truly and earnestly repent their sin. Our sorrow is mingled with joy as we look back and remember the Christ crucified.

### **An Encounter with the Risen Lord**

The Lord's Supper cannot be a *mere* memorial meal, because the Saviour who died is also the Lord who rose. As we remember Jesus, we become aware of his presence with us. To celebrate the Lord's Supper is to be given yet another opportunity to encounter the risen Lord.

Roman Catholics see in the consecrated bread and wine the literal body and blood of Jesus, which has led them to talk of the 'real presence' of Jesus. While Baptists cannot accept the doctrine of transubstantiation, they have consistently affirmed that Jesus is 'spiritually' present at the Table. In this sense, we believe in 'the real presence'. As C.H. Spurgeon, the great Victorian Baptist preacher and arch-Protestant, said in one of his communion sermons:

“As surely as the Jesus came really as to His flesh to Bethlehem and Calvary, so surely does he come really by His Spirit to His people in the hours of their communion with him”.

To ‘feed on Jesus by faith’ is a Biblical metaphor expressing the fellowship which Christians have with their Lord: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me” (John 6.56, 57). Although Jesus does not come nearer to us in the bread and wine, we through eating bread and drinking wine may come nearer to him. Luke records that the couple on the Emmaus Road recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread (Luke 24.30,31).

That experience has been repeated in the lives of many Christians since. For what is true of worship in general, is true of the Lord's Supper in particular: as we "approach" God (Heb 10.22) we discover ourselves caught up into heaven itself and join with the great multitude around the throne (Heb 10.18-24).

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*John has been a church member for ten years. He admits that he finds it easier to understand the ‘memorial meal’ aspect of the Lord’s Supper than to experience there an ‘encounter with the risen Lord’. Is John typical of Baptists you know? If so, why the strong emphasis on the ‘memorial’ aspect? How would you help John to see the Supper as much more than an occasion for grateful remembering?*

## **A Taste of Heaven**

The Lord's Supper also contains a future aspect. Jesus not only commanded his disciples to remember him in this way "until he comes" (1 Cor 11.26), he also said that he would drink no more wine "until that day I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt 26.29). Underlying this is the Jewish picture of the Kingdom of God as a great banquet (see, for instance, Isaiah 25.6). Jesus, as he instituted this Supper, looked forward to the coming of God's Kingdom. In turn, as we eat and drink, we too may look forward to that day when suffering and death are no more, and when we together with all God's people will be united with God himself (Rev 21.3,4). In this sense, the Lord's Supper offers a taste of heaven.

Baptists - along with many other Christians too - have not always successfully managed to combine this note of triumph together with their focus on the Cross in their ‘celebration’ of the Lord's Supper. In spite of their antipathy toward a crucifix, at the Lord's Supper many Baptists tend to gaze on the form of the dying Saviour, and miss out on the enthronement of the Lamb (see Revelation 5). In the past British Baptists used not to talk of ‘celebrating’ the Lord's Supper, but of ‘observing the ordinance’. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of these ‘observances’ have had as much life about them as the undertaker's morgue! Fortunately, the tide is beginning to turn and many churches end their celebrations of the Lord's Supper with a hymn of triumph in which the lordship of the risen and returning Christ is to the fore.

## **An Expression of Fellowship**

For Baptists the Lord's Supper has provided an opportunity for expressing personal devotion. As the bread is eaten and the wine drunk, private prayer is encouraged. However, Baptists

have never treated the Lord's Supper as a time for individualism, but have used it as an occasion for expressing their fellowship in Christ. And rightly so. It is as we draw nearer to Christ that we draw nearer to one another. According to Paul, the one loaf is a symbol of our oneness in Christ (1 Cor 10.17). The Lord's Supper inevitably has a corporate dimension - the more so when one reflects that it had its origin in a meal for a group of friends.

There was a time in Baptist church life when this corporate dimension was emphasised by the taking of a communion offering for the poorer members of the fellowship. In most churches this has fallen into disuse - not least because of the desire to have an 'all-in-budget' which dispenses with a communion offering. There are, however, other ways in which fellowship can be expressed.

- In many Baptist churches it is at the Lord's Table that new members are given the right hand of fellowship and welcomed into membership (see Gal 2.9).
- It is customary in many churches to share news of the fellowship at the Lord's Table and to remember the needs of the fellowship in prayer.
- Some churches have revived the ancient Christian practice of exchanging the Peace, when an opportunity is given to members of the congregation to greet and bless one another (see Rom 16.16; 2 Cor 13.12; 1 Thess 5.26; 1 Pet 5.14).
- Many churches have re-introduced the use of one loaf for communion as distinct from using pre-prepared cubes of bread, although few have re-introduced the use of one communion cup. However, where individual communion glasses are used, another way of expressing of fellowship is waiting until all are served, before drinking together.

In such ways Baptists affirm that the Lord's Supper is a fellowship meal.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*By what other means does or could your church effectively express the fellowship significance of the Lord's Supper?*

### **An Opportunity for Rededication**

If the Lord's Supper is to be meaningful, it must end in renewed dedication. It must spur us onwards in our service of Christ. Sometimes at the Lord's Table we read the words of the Psalmist:

"What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people". (Psalm 116.12-14)

Although traditionally Baptists have not used the term 'sacrament' of the Lord's Supper - no doubt reacting against some of the magical associations with the word found in certain church traditions - it is good to be aware that the Latin word *sacramentum* at one time meant a soldier's oath of loyalty to his emperor. In this sense the Lord's Supper can be sacramental: for, as we gather around the Table and rejoice in the Saviour's power today, we may renew our baptismal vows to the Lord who loved us and gave himself for us.

## **A TYPICAL BAPTIST CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER**

A typical Baptist celebration of the Lord's Supper will include the following elements:

### **Opening Worship**

The Lord's Supper is part of the main worship of the church. At one stage English Baptist churches had an unfortunate custom of making the Lord's Supper into an optional extra service tagged on to the main service - and often attended by only a few. The reason for the separation between the main service and the communion service was to ensure that the table was 'fenced' and that only committed Christians took the bread and wine. This 'fencing' resulted in many regarding the service as optional, rather than as central to the church's worship. Happily today the vast majority of English Baptist churches have integrated the Lord's Supper into the main worship service.

Although the Lord's Supper belongs primarily to Sunday worship, there is no good reason to restrict it to a Sunday. For instance, a home group might celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Where this happens, many Baptist churches would feel that the church leadership should be informed. For while their understanding of the priesthood of all believers leads most Baptists to accept that an ordained pastor need not be present at every celebration of the Lord's Supper, they tend to feel that private celebrations of the Lord's Supper run counter to the spirit of Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 11, and so run the risk of bringing the church of God into contempt (see 1 Cor 11.27).

### **The Proclamation of the Word**

Just as at the Last Supper there would have been a solemn recitation of the events leading up to the first Passover (see Exodus 12.26,27), so when the first Christians gathered to break bread and drink wine, they would have recited the story of how God in Christ had set his people free. This is what is behind the words of Paul in 1 Cor 11.26. It is not the eating and drinking which proclaim, but the telling of the story of our salvation. Baptists, with their emphasis on preaching, have rightly combined the proclamation of the Word with the celebration of the Supper.

In recent years some Baptists have sought to make the Lord's Supper more central to their worship by adopting the practice of having communion before the sermon. Others are unhappy with this practice and argue that this is a strange innovation. In the Supper we respond to the love of God. To allow the Supper to precede the Word is to run the risk of reducing the eating of bread and drinking of wine to a magical rite; it also distorts the logical flow of the service and causes the sermon to appear very much an optional extra.

A strong case can be made for the Lord's Supper being the climax to all the worship that has gone before. However, the mere fact that the Lord's Supper comes at the end of the service does not guarantee it being the highpoint - it can just as well be an addendum, if the sermon is not seen to link clearly with the Supper. This does not mean that every sermon at communion has to centre around the cross. On the other hand, it does mean that every communion sermon has to say something about the grace of God and our need to respond to it. What a wonderful constraint!

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*If the Lord's Supper is a response to the Word, does this mean that it is never right for the sermon to follow the Supper, or are there occasions when that would be appropriate?*

### **The Giving of the Peace**

At some stage within any worship service there is much to be said for an opportunity being given to the congregation to greet one another. Of course, such a greeting is not dependent on the Lord's Supper, but it seems appropriate to offer it then as we remember the one who broke down "the dividing wall" of "hostility" and has made us "one" (Eph 2.15).

The time of greeting may be the occasion when those who, for one reason or another, have been out of fellowship with one another, reaffirm their relationship in Christ. Only where relationships are right is worship acceptable. In this respect, Jesus' teaching in Matt 5.23,24 comes to mind:

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift".

Although Jesus is not referring to the Lord's Supper, the underlying principle makes the passage relevant: a precondition for worship is right relationships.

This was a major issue for Paul in his dealings with the church at Corinth. He goes so far as to say, "Anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord (i.e. the church) eats and drinks judgement upon himself" (1 Cor 11.29). However, ideals are not always practicable. Relationships cannot normally be restored within a matter of minutes. Far better for a church member to abstain from communion rather than indulge in cheap reconciliation.

### **The Invitation to the Table**

In Baptist history the question of who was or was not invited to the meal has been a matter of some controversy. John Smyth, for instance, argued that "only baptised persons must partake". John Bunyan, however, felt otherwise. In his *Difference in judgement about water baptism no bar to communion* (1673) he wrote:

"The Church of Christ hath no warrant to keep out of communion the Christian that is discovered to be a visible saint of the word, the Christian that walketh according to his own light".

For the next two centuries 'terms of communion' dominated discussion among Baptists. Today all churches in membership with the Baptist Union of Great Britain have an open table - as over against the 'Strict and Particular Baptists' who normally close the table to those who have not been baptised as believers.

Amongst British Baptists it has become customary to invite to the table "all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ". But is the invitation now too open? In theory, if we truly love Jesus,

we will want to love his people and commit ourselves to them through the process of becoming church members. In practice, such an invitation results in people who are not members of any church eating bread and drinking wine. Yet if 1 Cor 11.27-29 be a guide, then this is surely tantamount to not "recognising the body of the Lord" and thus is equivalent to eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner". The Lord's Supper is for the Lord's people, and the Lord's people by definition are those who have publicly committed themselves to the Lord and his people.

In Baptist terms, this should mean that the table is open to those who have been baptised as believers and have become members of their local church. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that many Baptists would be unhappy with this approach and would feel that church membership is not a requirement for participation at the Lord's Table. Yet if Baptists were to take their theology seriously, such a position would be illogical. For, in a Baptist context, baptism and church membership are the inevitable signs of commitment to the Lord Jesus and his people. It therefore does not make sense theologically to allow young people, for instance, who have been brought up in a Baptist church, to eat bread and drink wine before they have been baptised and become members of the church.

One important exception to this argument needs to be made. In so far as the Lord's Supper is for the Lord's people - and not just for Baptists - in these days of divided understanding on the biblical doctrine of baptism we cannot restrict the table just to Baptists and others who have been baptised as believers, but rather include all those who are in good standing with their local church, whatever that might mean. In this way, the table is still open - and yet not open to all and sundry.

*TO THINK ABOUT*

*How would you word the invitation to the Table?*

One final word needs to be said about the invitation: the invitation is always directed to sinners, albeit penitent sinners. The words of Paul regarding eating and drinking 'unworthily' have sometimes been wrenched from their context (which is about right relationships with others in the church) and interpreted of our standing before Christ. The fact is not none of us is 'worthy' of God's love for us in Jesus - the invitation is therefore always an invitation rooted in God's love for the undeserving. For this reason Baptist ministers have often included the following wording as part of their invitation to the Table:

"Come to this sacred table, not because you must but because you may; come not to testify that you are righteous, but that you sincerely love our Lord Jesus Christ, and desire to be his true disciples; come, not because you are strong, but because you are weak; not because you have any claim on heaven's rewards, but because in your frailty and sin you stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help."

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Are there exceptions to the arguments that have been advanced? Should pastoral sensitivity sometimes override matters of principle – for example, in the cause of adult members of the congregation who are neither baptised nor church members but who wish to come to the Table? What about children who profess to love Jesus as their Saviour, but who are neither baptised nor church members?*

## **The ‘Words of Institution’**

The ‘words of institution’ are generally taken from 1 Cor 11.23-26, where Paul details the tradition concerning the Lord's Supper which was handed down to him. However, there is no reason why the accounts of the Last Supper from the Gospels should not be used too - almost certainly those accounts owe their place in the Gospels as a result of their usage in celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

In addition, Baptists often include a selection of other Scriptures, which in various ways throw light on other aspects of the Lord's Supper (Psalm 116.12-14,17; Isaiah 53; Matt 5.6; 11.28-29; John 3.16; 6.35, 51; Rom 5.8; 8.15-16; 1 Cor 10.16-17; 1 Tim 1.15; 1 John 4.9-10; Rev 3.20).

## **The Prayer(s) of Thanksgiving**

Increasingly Baptist churches are patterning themselves on the observance of the liturgical churches and tend to have only one prayer of thanksgiving for the bread and the wine.

Where most Baptist churches differ from many other churches is that normally this prayer is taken not by the minister but by one of the deacons. This custom derives from their desire to emphasise that Christians need no priest to consecrate the elements. Historically this has been a protest prayer!

The following quotation from *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* sums up the significance of the Prayer of Thanksgiving:

"The Prayer of Thanksgiving centres on those mighty acts of God whereby our redemption was accomplished. It is a recalling of the Passion story when our Lord was lifted up in suffering and glory, and a looking forward in hope to the final victory of love. It is an act of thanksgiving for the bread and wine which are symbols of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This prayer calls upon the Holy Spirit, that by his presence in their hearts the people may enter into the meaning of the bread and wine, draw near to the risen Christ, and receive him afresh. It concludes with a fitting response of love, gratitude and re-consecration." <sup>3</sup>

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Does it matter who offers the prayer of thanksgiving at the Lord's Supper?*

## **The Breaking of Bread and Pouring of Wine**

From the accounts of the Last Supper in the Gospels and in 1 Cor 11, it is clear that Jesus gave particular meaning to his action of breaking the bread: "This is my body, broken for you", he declared. The action of breaking the bread represented his body given for us. British Baptists have tended to reduce the symbolism present in this action with their use - on grounds of hygiene! - of small cubes of bread. In some churches, if there is bread to break at all, then it is a miserable piece of thin sliced white bread. Many Baptists are pleased that in an increasing number of churches a proper loaf of bread is used, with the result that the symbolism of the oneness that we have in Christ is restored too (see 1 Cor 10.17).

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<sup>3</sup> *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship: A Guide for Worship Leaders*. OUP 1991

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Betty and Tom feel uncomfortable when their minister holds the loaf high and breaks it very deliberately. They say it is 'priestly' and un-Baptist. Have they got a point, or do they miss a lot by their objection to symbolic actions and practice?*

To those from other Christian traditions, the Baptist use of small individual cups of grape juice seems strange. However, it is important to note that this was not always so. Earlier Baptists - and still many Baptists on the Continent of Europe - shared a few large cups and thereby emphasised their fellowship with Jesus and with one another in the shared cup (see 1 Cor 10.16). A change came about in the early 20th century, when the free churches in Britain adopted the temperance cause: this led to the non-use of alcoholic wine and the adoption of grape-juice or non-alcoholic 'wine', which made many feel that small cups are more hygienic. The argument turned on the fact that whereas the alcohol present in wine has a certain 'sterilising' effect, grape juice or its equivalent fails to kill off any germs. Interestingly, this concern for hygiene was due more to advertisers than to doctors!

In many Baptist churches today the symbolism of the one cup is retained by a silver or wooden chalice on the table - along with the small glass cups. It has become customary for the minister - or whoever is presiding at the table - to lift up the cup in full view of the congregation, as an action corresponding to the breaking of bread. However, in view of the Lord's own reference to his blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins, one might wonder whether the symbolism of pouring the wine into the cup might be more appropriate. Perhaps we should bring back the old flagons used by our Baptist forefathers!

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Henry dislikes the diced cubes of bread used at communion services, whilst Mary has vowed she will not come to the Table if there is a common loaf. Jenny finds the use of small glasses mildly ludicrous, whilst Bill, who is anxious about his health, would pass the common cup by if it was adopted. How should the church deal with the dilemma? What is the practice in your church and is it, in your opinion, the right one?*

## **Serving One Another**

Because Baptists do not regard their ministers as priests, there is a great variety and freedom in the way in which the bread and wine are distributed. Unlike the practice of many other churches, Baptists do not normally go forward to receive communion, but are served the bread and wine as they sit in their seats. In theory, by serving one another in their pews, Baptists emphasise the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. A further reason for remaining seated is that this custom reflects the practice of the New Testament church, for whom the Lord's Supper was very much a meal.

Traditionally deacons have served the members of the congregation, but increasingly - in England at least - members of the congregation are encouraged to serve one another, and as they do so to use such phrases as "The body of Christ was broken for you", "The blood of Christ was broken for you". This is the priesthood of all believers in action.

## **Praying for One Another**

In many Baptist churches the eating of bread and drinking of wine is followed by a pastoral prayer, where the sick and elderly are prayed for, and other absent members of the fellowship are remembered.

Increasingly this time is also used to pray for those who are present at the Table. With the injunction of James 5.16 to "pray for one another, so that you may be healed", an invitation is often given to any who would like special prayer, whether for healing or for some other personal concern, to come to the Table for prayer and the laying-on-of-hands. The minister together with others, whether deacons or not, take part in this ministry. Formerly prayer for healing was a private affair, reserved for members of the congregation 'in extremis'. Today there is the recognition that such prayer may be used to benefit God's people at any time.

The Lord's Supper is an occasion for prayer not only for the needs of the local fellowship, but also for the needs of the wider church. It is an appropriate moment to pray for missionaries and the church of Christ overseas, for the local Baptist association and its regional ministers, for the Baptist colleges and other Christian institutions, and, of course, for churches of other traditions in the area. Here the horizontal dimension of the Lord's Supper receives expression.

Right as it is to focus especially upon God's people, we need to go on and remember the world for whom Christ died. Just as there are no limits to God's love and concern, so too there should be no limits to the love and concern of his church. In other words, prayers of intercession in general could meaningfully be part of the Lord's Supper.

God's love and concern include not only people in the present, but also those in the past. Indeed, those who have died in Christ are very much people in the present. In our Baptist tradition we do not pray for the dead, but we can give thanks afresh for the safekeeping of those who have died in Christ, and look forward to the day when we shall be reunited with them - as also with all God's people.

Hopefully somewhere within these prayers there will also be an opportunity for those gathered around the Table to renew their commitment to the Lord. If our love for our Lord is to be at all meaningful, then it must issue in action in the week that lies ahead.

### *TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Baptists need not reject an awareness of those who have died in Christ. The following lines from the 'Sursum Corda illustrate this: "Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name..." How could more be done at a communion service both to recall thankfully the lives of those who have gone before us and to celebrate the ever-growing family of God, which includes the living and the dead?*

## **An Outburst of Praise**

Baptists are learning to combine the note of celebration with the serious and sombre task of remembering. The cross cannot be isolated from the resurrection, just as the resurrection cannot be isolated from the cross.

In some Baptist churches the congregation is encouraged to express their love for Jesus immediately after receiving the bread and wine by being given an opportunity to intermingle short prayers of praise and thanksgiving with simple worship songs. The remembrance of Calvary provides fresh stimulus for praise.

Other churches may prefer simply to surround the eating of bread and drinking of wine with periods of private meditation, which may then lead into prayers for others. But even where such an order of service is followed, the service will almost always climax in a final hymn of praise. The hymn might enable the congregation to sing the praises of the risen, ascended and reigning Lord Jesus. Jesus is Lord - not of the church but of the world, Lord of history, Lord of time, Lord before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. With such praise on their lips the congregation may go on their way, with heads held high, rejoicing.

## 4. CELEBRATING THE FAITH A Baptist approach to Worship

### DIVERSITY IN WORSHIP

A description of early Baptist worship in Amsterdam is found in a letter sent by Hugh and Anne Bromehead:

"We begin with a prayer, after read some one or two chapters of the Bible; give the sense thereof and confer upon the same; that done, we lay aside our books and after a solemn prayer made by the first speaker he propoundeth some text out of the Scripture and prophesieth out of the same by the space of one hour or three quarters of an hour. After him standeth up a second speaker and prophesieth out of the said text the like time and space, sometimes more, sometimes less. After him, the third, the fourth, the fifth etc., as the time will give leave. Then the first speaker concludeth with prayer as he began with prayer, with an exhortation to contribution to the poor, which collection being made is also concluded with prayer. This morning exercise begins at eight of the clock and continueth unto twelve of the clock. The like course of exercise is observed in the afternoon from two of the clock unto five or six of the clock. Last of all the execution of the government of the Church is handled".

#### *TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Your immediate reaction may be to thank God that you were not a Baptist in seventeenth century Amsterdam! The next reaction is possibly to realise that there is no one Baptist pattern of worship. For down through the centuries Baptists have been in the process of change and evolution. Furthermore, what may be acceptable amongst Baptists in one country may not be acceptable to another. Our Russian Baptist brothers and sisters, for instance, are very happy to listen to three sermons, one after the other, all in the same service, with the result that their services are of a length with which most British Baptists would find it difficult to cope on a regular basis. Who is to say that one form of service is more Baptist than another?*

Baptists are 'nonconformists' and cherish their liturgical freedom. They do not have an authorised book of services and prayers, which regulates the way in which they structure their orders of service. Although they may produce books such as *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*,<sup>4</sup> none of these books are normative. As radical believers, for them the Bible alone is authoritative. Baptists are therefore free to respond to the leading of the Spirit and free to respond to the changing circumstances in which they live. In a way which is not always true of some of the more liturgical churches, Baptists - in principle at least - have an enviable flexibility. True, Baptists have not always taken advantage of their liturgical freedom. They have at times become as hidebound to tradition as other groups of Christians. But where Baptists are true to their radical roots, there they have freedom to change and vary their patterns of worship.

For all the diversity of Baptist worship, there is, on the whole, a distinctive Baptist approach to worship. However much Baptist worship may vary, generally speaking there are certain

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<sup>4</sup> *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Believers* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005) edited by Christopher Ellis and Myra Blyth for the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

common characteristics

## LET GOD SPEAK

The first general characteristic of Baptist worship is the emphasis on the sermon. Preaching is central to any Baptist worship service. It would be almost unthinkable for a Baptist service not to contain a sermon. Furthermore, while in some church traditions eight to ten minutes would be deemed quite sufficient, most Baptists would feel short-changed with anything under 15 minutes, and would normally expect something in the region of 20-25 minutes. Indeed, in some Baptist churches, the sermon lasts considerably longer!

Baptist preachers have always sought to be Bible-centred and Bible-driven. Biblical preaching involves more than having a text from Scripture or peppering the sermon with Scripture quotations: it involves wrestling with the message of the text. Unfortunately, as C.H. Spurgeon remarked,

“Some brethren have done with their text as soon as they have read it. Having paid all due honour to that particular passage by announcing it, they feel no necessity further to refer to it. They touch their hats, as it were, to that part of Scripture, and pass on to fresh fields and pastures new... surely the words of inspiration were never meant to be boathooks to help a Talkative to draw on his seven-leagued boots in which to leap from pole to pole.”

Baptist preaching at its best is expository preaching, where the text shapes the sermon from beginning to end. Expository preaching, however, cannot remain with the text: it needs to apply God's Word in a creative, sensitive and relevant way to the congregation. It is because of the need to relate God's Word to the world of today that we cannot simply reproduce the sermons of great Baptist preachers of the past. Their sermons are dated. It is, of course, not the Word of God which has become dated; rather it is the situation which has changed.

Some question whether the sermon has had its day. Certainly it is not easy preaching in a post-modern society which rejects any claim to objective truth, which questions authority whether it be that of the preacher or of the Bible, and which has no interest in the 'big story' of God and his love. However, although the form of the sermon may well have to change, the fact is that the Gospel is about 'news' and not just about 'views'. The preacher is there to proclaim the great acts of God in Christ.

### *TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Is there a correlation between length of sermon and quality? It has been said that a person with something to say can say it in 20 minutes - a person with nothing to say needs at least 40 minutes!*

The sermon remains the centrepiece of most Baptist worship services. In Britain when a church is looking for a new minister, the candidate is normally invited to come and 'preach with a view'. It is by their preaching that Baptist ministers generally stand or fall. Not surprisingly the training of preachers is a high priority in our Baptist theological colleges.

If a 'sacrament' is a means of God's blessing his people, then for Baptists preaching is their primary sacrament. Traditional Baptist church architecture reflects the centrality of the Word by putting the pulpit in a central position, in contrast to the typical Anglican church, where

the 'altar' is central and the pulpit is often found at the side. Furthermore, Anglican churches always have a central aisle, but many Baptist churches have their pews in the centre - even this seating arrangement emphasises that people have come to listen to the Word of God rather than go forward for communion.

Today Baptist architecture is in a state of flux. Many churches have got rid of their pulpits, preferring a more informal approach to the delivery of the sermon. Instead of the high central pulpit, 'six feet above contradiction', being the central point of focus, it is often the screen, on which video clips can be shown or a PowerPoint presentation made.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Should methods of teaching and learning, other than traditional preaching, be used more widely, and if so, what methods?*

Despite their emphasis on the sermon, Baptists have not always paid great attention to the reading of the Scriptures. Whereas in a service of worship in the more liturgical churches there are often three Scripture readings (from the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels), in addition to a Psalm or two, in many Baptist churches there is only one Scripture reading, and sometimes short at that. Many argue that this practice does not take Scripture seriously enough, and that although God may speak through the sermon, in the first place he speaks through his Word.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*What practice do you think adequately does justice to Paul's advice to Timothy: "Give attention to the public reading of scripture" (1 Tim 4.13)? Who should and who should not read the Bible passages in a service of worship?*

## **PSALMS, HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS**

Hymns and songs characterised the life of the early church. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "Sing psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts" (Eph 5.19). In similar fashion he wrote to the Colossians:

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God" (Col 3.16).

It is highly likely that in such passages as Phil 2.6-11, Col 1.15-20 and 1 Tim 3.16 we have examples of early Christian hymns quoted by Paul.

### **Benjamin Keach's influence**

Although the example of early Baptist worship at the beginning of this chapter indicates that the first Baptists did not obey Paul's injunction, it was not long before Baptists did begin to make melody to the Lord. Towards the end of the seventeenth century Benjamin Keach, a Baptist pastor, gradually introduced the use of non-Psalms hymns into the worship of his congregation. He began by introducing a hymn at the end of the Lord's Supper, on the grounds that Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before leaving the Upper Room for the

Mount of Olives (Matt 26.30). Eventually he introduced a hymn at the end of worship in response to the sermon so that those who disagreed with the practice were able to leave first!

Changes in worship are never accomplished without controversy. Thirteen of Keach's members transferred their membership in protest. A book was published denouncing this new-fangled practice as worse than infant baptism and maintaining that it was artificial and therefore alien to the free motions of the Spirit of God! The criticism might have been better directed, if the focus had been on the poor quality of the hymns Keach had written. For example:

"Our wounds do stink and are corrupt,  
Hard swellings we do see;  
We want a little ointment, Lord,  
Let us more humble be.

Here meets them now that worm that gnaws,  
And plucks their bowels out;  
The pit, too, on them shuts her jaws,  
This dreadful is, no doubt."

Keach eventually won the day, and hymn-singing became a feature of Baptist life. In 1769 two Baptists, John Ash and Caleb Evans published *A Collection of hymns adapted to public worship*, which was the first compilation of hymns by different authors. It should be noted, however, that the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were into composing and singing their own hymns and songs long before Benjamin Keach. Their hymns were collected in the Anabaptist *Ausbund*, and a translation of one of their hymns, 'Our Father God, thy name we praise' was included in *Baptist Praise and Worship*

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Suggest some areas of church life where, like Benjamin Keach, Baptists could be innovative, take risks and engage in imaginative, albeit controversial initiatives.*

### **Old Hymns - New Songs**

Today Baptists in many parts of the world face a new controversy: are the traditional hymns of the church so much a feature of the past that only the new songs born of charismatic renewal are the order of the day?

The last British Baptist hymnbook, *Baptist Praise and Worship*, was published in 1991. It was not, however, adopted by most British Baptist churches. Initially this was because some churches preferred other collections of hymns; now many churches no longer use hymnbooks at all, but prefer to sing from the screen.

One of the difficulties any new hymnbook would face is the rate of change experienced by churches in their worship. Not only are new songs being constantly being added to the repertoire, but the 'new' songs of previous years are often no longer sung. The fact is that the worship life of the church does not stand still - or if it does, then it dies.

In the past Baptists tended to confess their faith in the singing of their hymns. For although

the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed are not the exclusive preserve of the historic state churches, Baptists by and large have not used the creeds in worship. If Baptists were to do away with hymns altogether, the danger is that at the same time they would rob themselves of an opportunity to confess their faith. For, although generalisations are dangerous and difficult to make in an area where there is so much change, it is true to say that many of the old hymns have substance in a way which is not always true of some modern worship songs: many of the latter are relatively short and are intended to be used in a repetitive - if not meditative - fashion. Clearly modern worship songs can be credal in style, but the use to which they are put tends to be different from that of the hymns.

Some argue that wise worship leaders today need to emulate the converted scribe and bring out of the church's storeroom of praise "treasure new and old" (Matt 13.52). As Paul realised (Eph 5.19 and Col 3.16), variety is important: "hymns, songs, and psalms" should be varied in content and style to suit the differing tastes and moods of the people of God.

### **Music Groups**

In the first edition of *Radical Believers* a section was devoted to the use of church choirs. However, almost without exception, choirs in Baptist churches have been disbanded. In their place is 'the music group' with guitars, drums, flutes and other musical instruments.

In many Baptist churches music groups have replaced the organ; in other churches they complement the traditional music of the church. The fact is that the organ is not normally suited to accompany the singing of some of the modern worship songs.

The role of music groups is not without controversy. One issue relates to the leadership of worship. In many churches the leader of the music group is the worship leader which can mean that the minister's role is limited to preaching. Not all leaders of music groups, however, are necessarily good leaders of worship. The leading of worship is a 'science' as well as an 'art' - it demands knowledge which comes from learning and training.

Many Baptists welcome their ministers sharing worship with others, but some are unhappy when ministers totally abrogate their role in worship. On the other hand, many ministers are glad when they are able to share the responsibility for the planning of worship with others. Life was relatively easy when there was one hymnbook and an organ - today there are a multiplicity of worship resources and in many churches a wide range of musicians of admittedly varying standard willing to share their gifts in the worship of God. The result is that in some churches people are being appointed as 'worship co-ordinators' or 'music directors' to assist their minister in this vital area of church life.

In the light of the tensions which the introduction of different styles of music sometimes poses, one Baptist church developed the following statement of music 'policy':

“Music is not an end in itself, it is a vehicle for worship. Although God is at the centre of our worship, the style and content will vary to enable the people of God in all their variety to express their praise and adoration, their confession and penitence, their dedication and commitment.

In turn the task of the church's musicians is to enable music to be a vehicle for

worship, and through their music making to reflect a variety of styles appropriate to the various age-groups and tastes present within the church.

As with all other aspects of the church's worship life, we strive for excellence. However, the quest for excellence should not deter the encouraging of others from contributing to the worship of the church.

Although the minister has overall responsibility for all aspects of the church's worship, he looks to the church's musicians for help and advice wherever appropriate.”

Perhaps the question British Baptists need to ask themselves is: Do our churches reflect the diversity which is present within our present-day general culture?

## FREEDOM IN PRAYER

In contrast with the set prayers of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, Baptists traditionally use free forms of prayer. Not for them a Prayer Book! From their beginnings Baptists along with the other Free Churches have been proud of their freedom to address God in whatever manner they deem fit.

### Advantages of free prayer

- **Spontaneity:** The very form of extempore prayer is warm and direct, intimate and personal, and thereby expresses something of the believers' relationship with God.
- **Relevance** to the needs of the congregation and of the wider world. By its very nature free prayer can be both immediate and particular.
- **Realism:** Free prayer has a greater feeling of reality about it. It is more immediately perceived as a conversation with God. The focus is God - not the printed page!

### Disadvantages of free prayer

- **Dependent on the leader's mood** which may vary according to weather, health, or general feelings.
- **Stereotyped language** repeating well-worn phrases and pious clichés.
- **Undisciplined** prayer can be wordy, meandering, long and tedious. Bernard Manning, who as a Congregationalist shared a common tradition of prayer with Baptists, wrote: "I still feel something of the horror with which the Long Prayer always affected me when I was a boy. Everywhere it was always the same. There appeared to be no chance it would ever end. You simply resigned yourself. Time after time occurred places at which an admirable ending could have been made; but no, 'Pray without ceasing': that apostolic word had been only too carefully observed. I watched the sunbeam broken in windows and caught in the gilt of the hymn book covers; I played every game and then, at last, it was over: and we raised our heads, it seemed to me, like people coming out of our huts after a tornado anxious to see who is still there and who is missing."

### Prepared Free Prayer

No Baptist can fail to recognise the disadvantages of free prayer. We have all suffered from prayers that have not been carefully thought out. But that is in fact the key. Free prayer is not necessarily 'extempore' prayer. Isaac Watts distinguished between 'conceived' or prepared free prayer "done by some work of meditation before we begin to speak in prayer" and 'extempore' free prayer, "when we without any reflection or meditation beforehand address ourselves to God and speak the thoughts of our hearts as fast as we conceive them".

While extempore prayer may be right in the home and in prayer meetings, there is much to be said for the prepared prayer in public services of worship. To be fair, that is the way in which many Baptist ministers and worship leaders operate. Would that all did! The fact is that we are free to produce the very best prayers - but also free to abuse our freedom and end up with the third-rate.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Recall occasions when you were led in bad and unhelpful 'free prayer'. Why did it leave you so dissatisfied?*

## **Open Prayer**

In in many Baptist churches opportunities are given for worshippers to participate in open prayer within the main Sunday worship services. These opportunities vary: sometimes there will be a time of 'open worship' where the emphasis is on praise; sometimes spontaneous prayers of intercession may be invited; at other times prayer will be made in response to what God has been saying through the sermon; or gathered around the Lord's Table worshippers may respond with short prayers of adoration or thanksgiving for God's grace in Christ. Prayer, for Baptists, is no 'priestly' monopoly.

Do note that the larger the church, the more important it is that those who pray can make themselves heard.

## **FREEDOM IN WORSHIP**

### **Congregational Participation**

Baptists not only have freedom in prayer but also in worship generally. Congregational participation is encouraged in many churches. Along with opportunities for open prayer, other contributions may be invited from the congregation, for example, a word of testimony or a word of encouragement, a reading or a song (see 1 Cor 14.26).

Controversy has raged over the validity of some of the more specific 'charismatic' gifts such as tongues and prophecy. Although in England most Baptists are willing to acknowledge that in principle the Lord has not withdrawn such gifts, it can be difficult to discern whether a particular tongue or prophecy is of the Lord. The scriptural injunction to 'test' and 'weigh' everything (see 1 Cor 14.29 and 1 John 4.1) is clearly of vital importance. On the whole Baptist churches prefer to follow Paul and reserve 'tongues' for private use (see 1 Cor 14). As for 'prophecy', that gift along with words of 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' may best be shared in the context of the church meeting, for the church meeting is the place where Baptists seek to discern the mind of Christ with regard to the church's life and ministry.

We need to recognise that the larger the group, the more difficult spontaneous participation becomes. Shared worship of the kind described in 1 Cor 14.26 is not easy where large numbers are involved. What is possible in a congregation of fifty (the size of first-century houses suggests this was the maximum number of Christians worshipping at Corinth at any one time) may well be impossible in a congregation of one hundred and fifty.

We need too to recognise that 'spontaneous' worship is not necessarily more 'spiritual' than 'prepared' worship. The Spirit can be just as much at work in the preparation as in the actual leading of worship. Totally unplanned worship, far from being more spiritual, can be a sign of our laziness and of our unwillingness to use our God-given faculties in his service. God demands our best - not least in the area of worship (see 2 Sam 24.24)

### **Decently and in Order**

Freedom in worship encompasses not just the more charismatic expressions of Baptists life, but Baptist life in general. There is no one Baptist order of worship service. Yet our freedom must not become an excuse for disorder. The words of Paul should be taken seriously: "All things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14.40).

The introduction to the Baptist manual, *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* made the following helpful comment on this verse:

"The Greek word translated 'decently' is also the origin of the word 'scheme'. It conveys the idea of things co-ordinated to a common purpose and points to a pattern which has its own inner logic. Early in the chapter Paul writes, 'For God is not a God of disorder but of peace' (1 Cor 14.33), and in Genesis we are told that the Spirit of God moved upon the waters (Gen 1.2) bringing order out of chaos. This is more than a statement about how the world was begun: it is a claim that this is how the world always is, held in orderly existence by God's Spirit which pervades all things. Yet the Spirit is not a creator of stereotypes. It is the unexpected that occurs within the basic pattern that is stimulating and exciting. Though all roses are the same, no two are identical. The elusive quality we call beauty is seen in the variations that give liveliness and interest. Worship too should have an underlying order that is not a chain but an invitation to freedom."

However free or open worship is, there always needs to be structure, in which the various ingredients of worship are to be found. The essential ingredients of Spirit-inspired worship find their roots in the Jewish synagogue and the Upper Room. To the praise and prayer, the Scripture readings and the sermon - all characteristic of the Jewish synagogue - were added the breaking of bread and the fellowship of the Upper Room. All these ingredients need to find expression in the worship, however the service might be ordered. It may be that in this area of Baptist life, other churches could help us reform ourselves.

#### *TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Recognising that there is no one God-given way for ordering public worship, how can we order our services so that the worship flows in a logical and balanced manner?*

## AIDS TO WORSHIP

### Historical Caution

British Baptists have been suspicious of any physical aids to worship: it was well into the second half of the twentieth century before even simple wooden crosses were displayed in the average British Baptist church. Baptist worship has been very much a cerebral exercise. The preaching of the Word has been at the centre of worship, with the result that people's response to God has been stimulated primarily by words. In the past there was little attempt to evoke worship through other means.

This approach to worship received expression in Baptist architecture. The early Baptist 'meeting houses', as the first Baptist church buildings were called, were plain in the extreme. There were no stained glass windows depicting Biblical scenes. The only symbols were an open Bible and the Table. If there was a baptistery, it was often hidden under the floorboards.

For Baptists the church has been first and foremost the people of God, and not the building. Hence in Wales and elsewhere, many Baptists - along with other Nonconformists - have preferred to speak of their buildings as 'chapels' rather than as 'churches'. Biblically speaking, such an emphasis is entirely right. Paul, for instance, wrote to the church at Corinth: "we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor 6.16), a statement which implies that God dwells wherever his people are found, and not in any particular building. This same thought is reflected in the words of Jesus: "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt 18.20). Church buildings are secondary

### Modern Trends

Today there is a realisation that although church buildings are secondary, this does not mean that buildings need to be plain. Just as the love of God for us was expressed in human form, so too we may express our love and our devotion for God in wood and brick. Just as the physical acts of eating bread and drinking wine can become means of grace, so too can the physical attributes of church buildings become means of grace to those who worship.

The use of Christian symbols of various kinds has become increasingly common in British Baptist churches. Stained glass windows of modern design and crosses of various shapes and sizes are now much more the norm. Most churches, too, will happily decorate their walls with bright banners, which not only give expression to various aspects of the Christian faith, but are seen also as helpful aids to worship.

In new churches, along with the communion table, there often is an open baptistery, sometimes sunk into the floor, but sometimes raised for all to see. If the Table speaks of what Jesus has done for us, the baptistery speaks of the response we need to make to Jesus. Sometimes too the roof of the church is built in such a way to remind worshippers of the wooden ark in which Noah and his family escaped from the flood, the ark which later became a symbol of the church and in turn a symbol of salvation.

In spite of this more positive approach to aids to worship, there is still a certain reserve in this area amongst British Baptists. Up until quite recently, apart from the Advent wreath with its

four candles, few Baptist churches would have followed their sister Scandinavian churches and lit candles on their communion tables - for the older generation that would have smacked too much of 'papism'. Yet the scene is changing. In some Baptist churches small 'night lights' are lit in the period of intercessory prayer as people remember others in need. Similarly there is little resistance to 'liturgical' dancing as an expression of and an aid to worship - such a display of the human form is no longer viewed as highly suspicious. With screens almost universal, the use of pictures is now another regular visual aid in worship.

## **MAKING THE MOST OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR**

As part of their Nonconformity Baptists have been suspicious of the Christian Year. The observance of special days has been frowned on, and texts such as Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16 have been cited in support of their non-observance. However, in Britain as also elsewhere many Baptist churches have come to recognise that their worship can be enriched through an imaginative celebration of a simplified liturgical year. Celebrating the Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, as also marking the seasons of Advent and Lent (including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday) adds richness and colour to the worship. Furthermore, whatever the predilections of the preacher, it ensures that in worship the congregation has a regular opportunity to focus upon the main events in the life of Jesus.

One autumnal Christian Festival which is being discovered by some Baptist churches is 'All Saints Day', the day when traditionally Christians remember all those who have died in Christ. Families and friends of those whose funerals have been conducted by the minister in the past year are invited to attend on the Sunday nearest All Saints Day to thank God for their loved ones who have passed through death to a new life and to ask God to give to those who remain fresh strength for living. It can be a great pastoral as also evangelistic opportunity, and provides a contrast to all the unhelpful associations with 'All Souls' Day' (Halloween).

In addition to celebrating the main Christian festivals, many Baptist churches also mark such events as the end of the year and the beginning of another with 'Watchnight' and 'Covenant' services; town churches as well as country churches celebrate Harvest Festival, these days often with special offerings for the poor in the two-thirds world; and, of course, there is the Church Anniversary. All of these call for special preaching.

There are also all sorts of other special days too. Every year the Baptist World Alliance invites Baptists to mark the first Sunday in February as 'Baptist World Alliance Day'. The last two Sundays of January normally mark the beginning and end of the 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity'. Then there is 'Mothering Sunday' ('Mothers Day') and 'Fathers Day'; 'Education Sunday', 'Homelessness Sunday', 'Racial Justice Sunday', 'Remembrance Sunday'; as also National Marriage Week, Christian Aid Week, Refugee Week, Fair Trade Fortnight.... The list is endless.

Churches need to be discerning, for not every Sunday can be 'special'. Nor must churches ever forget that first and foremost it is the resurrection of Jesus that they are celebrating on the first day of the week.

## THE 'DEDICATION' SERVICE

Within any family the birth of a child is a major event, and is a cause for celebration. For Christian parents it only seems natural and right to share their joy with the wider family of the church and publicly give thanks to God for the gift of their new child and seek God's blessing on this new life.

Yet what seems natural and right, has been treated by many Baptists in the world with grave suspicion. Most Baptists in the USA and not a few Baptists on the Continent of Europe believe that to hold a service where a child is at the centre of the attention, inevitably leads to confusion with infant baptism., and is therefore to be rejected.

British Baptists, however, have been willing to take the 'risk', and since the latter part of the 19th century have tended to hold a 'dedication service'.

### *TO THINK ABOUT*

*Is 'Dedication Service' the best title for this occasion? The latest Baptist worship manual, 'Gathering for Worship' speaks of 'Presenting, Blessing and Dedication'. Which term to describe the service would you argue for and why?*

### **Biblical Grounds**

Baptists being Baptists, they have often tried to give Biblical justification for this practice. Some point to the story of Samuel's dedication in 1 Sam 1.27,28. However, the parallel with a twenty-first-century dedication service is scarcely exact. Nobody hands over their child to the Lord in the way in which Hannah handed over her child. Others refer to the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2.22), but again the parallel is hardly appropriate: sacrifices are not held at dedication services! What is more, this ceremony only applied to the first-born, who were considered to belong to the Lord and had to be "redeemed" by him.

The most helpful parallel is found in the story of Jesus blessing the children (Matt 19.13-15; Mark 10.13-16; Luke 18.15-17), yet even there the parallel is not exact: only mothers seem to have been involved, and the occasion only seems to have been one of blessing, with no act of dedication on the parents' part.

Honesty compels us to admit that there are no biblical grounds for this custom. But then there are no biblical grounds for weddings and funerals being held in a church. However, just as it seems right and proper to mark weddings and funerals with a Christian service, so it is equally right and proper to mark the birth of a child with a Christian service. It is natural to want to thank God for the gift of a child and to ask his blessing on that child. Furthermore, the birth of a child is of such importance that it demands the utmost parents can give, as it also calls for the utmost grace that God can give. In other words, a 'dedication service' is primarily a service of thanksgiving for and blessing of the child, and of dedication of the parents.

The church also has a role on such an occasion. In churches that practise infant baptism, there are always godparents, who promise to help the child concern to 'pray for them, draw them by... example into the community of faith and walk with them in the way of Christ' as also

‘to help them to take their place within the life and worship of Christ’s Church’ (*Common Worship*). At a service of dedication in a Baptist church godparents are not present, instead the church promises its support for the child in question. Thus in one order of service the church is asked:

"As a congregation we too are involved in the Christian upbringing of .... In our life together we are called to set an example of love and service. However, in particular I would ask the members of this church to befriend, encourage and pray for this family, so that .... may in due time come to trust Christ as Saviour and confess him as Lord in baptism. If you, the members of this church are so willing, will you signify your acceptance by saying, 'We do'."

Church members in responding positively to such a question are expressing their commitment to one another, which is of the essence of church membership. In a large church, alas, it is easy for such an expression to have little meaning. All the more need, therefore, for the larger churches to find ways and means of support for the family, which are meaningful.

Baptists express their support for families by organising all kinds of weekly activities for children and young people. But important as such activities are, they do not meet every need. If a church is to take its commitment to families seriously, then children's ‘ministries’ need to be developed which are in the first place people-centred, rather than activity-centred. The fact is that there are times when children's most pressing needs are not to be busily occupied, but to be allowed to talk and express whatever is on their hearts.

### **Introduction to a modern Baptist service of thanksgiving, promise-making and blessing**

In this service we come to do three things.

1. In the first place we come to **thank God** for the gift of this new life. We want to publicly affirm that children are not just the result of a man and a woman coming together. Rather we believe that in and through the physical act of conception God is at work. This child .... is a miracle - s/he is a gift of God.
2. Secondly, we come to **make promises**. The parents ..... and .... come to promise not only to love and care for .... , but also to bring up their child within the Christian community and to share their faith with him/her. Today we want to affirm the key role that parents have in offering security to their children, and within that security allowing children to discover the security we all can have in God.

We, the members of this church and the friends of this family, also come to make a promise - a promise to offer our love and care for this family, and to join with the parents in sharing our Christian faith. Today we recognise the important responsibility we have as a church to help young parents and their children. In this church we run all kinds of activities for children and for parents - but activity in itself is not enough. Love in action is what is required.

3. Thirdly we come to **ask God's blessing** on .... remembering how the Lord Jesus took little children in his arms and blessed them. In other words, in this service we recognise our need of God in our lives. What a difference it makes when we open up

ourselves to God and to all that he has to offer to us

### **An Evangelistic Opportunity**

Baptists tend to regard the dedication service as an 'in-house' affair - the guest list is normally limited to the grandparents and other relatives. However, from an evangelistic perspective, there is much to be said for exploiting what by many people outside our churches is often regarded as a form of dry baptism. What a difference it makes, for instance, if the new parents invite not only their parents and relatives, but also their neighbours, their colleagues at work, their acquaintances in general. Who could fail to turn down an invitation couched along the lines: "We're having a special service for our new baby. Do come along and join us. What's more, after the service there'll be a lunch party at home". It would be churlish to refuse - not least in view of the party to follow! The upshot is that the congregation could be swelled by thirty or more guests, many of whom would perhaps not normally darken the door of a church. Handled with sensitivity, this could be a great occasion for preaching the Gospel.

So far the assumption has been that a dedication service is for Christian families alone - and certainly most requests for such a service come from church families. What about non-believers who wish to bring their child for a dedication service? Provided the parents are genuinely wanting to take God seriously - as distinct from wanting to please one set or other of their parents by having the child 'done' - there seems no good reason to refuse. A parallel can be drawn with the marriage service, which too is open to Christians and non-Christians alike: 'dedication', like marriage, belongs to the order of creation rather than the order of redemption. However, some of the words would need to be changed. The 'dedication' service would perhaps become more a service of 'thanksgiving and blessing'. In one modern Baptist order of service the question 'Do you promise to love and care for ....., to bring up him/her within the Christian community and to share your faith with him/her' is on such occasions replaced by the question, 'Do you promise to try to teach.... how God wants him/her to live, and by the way you live to set a good example'.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*What is your church's practice with regard to a 'dedication service' involving non-believing parents? Why has the church adopted that policy?*

## **CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH**

The fact that Baptists do not baptise children does not mean to say that children have no place in the life of a Baptist church. The average Baptist church has a wide range of activities catering for children of all ages.

### **Children in Worship**

Within the worshipping life of Baptist churches there is often a brief spot, when children become central to the service. Although the advent of morning Sunday School ('Junior Church') removed the justification for the old-fashioned 'children's address', with its three points and its complicated visual aids, many churches still ensure that one part of the morning service is specifically related to the needs of the children. Churches with uniformed

organisations such as the Brigades will in addition often hold a service once a month at which the children will stay in for the whole of the service.

Unfortunately there has sometimes been a temptation to downgrade the worship when children are present. There is something to be said for exposing children to the normal worship of the church and thereby allowing them to experience a sense of God's presence amongst his people. Children need to become familiar with the great hymns of the church, as well as to sing the newer worship songs.

Theologically Baptists have always seen children being within the scope of the saving work of Christ. Thus with regard to the fate of those who die in childhood, which for some paedobaptists has been an additional reason for practising infant baptism, Baptists believe that children, who neither sin with impunity nor consciously reject the word of God in Christ, are included in the solidarity of the redeemed with Christ (see Rom 5.12-21; 2 Cor 5.14,15). As for children of Christian parents, Baptists view their position as analogous to the catechumens of earlier times, who were being prepared for baptism and full membership of the church: i.e. children of believers are within the church, not outside it, but their entry into full membership awaits their confession of Christ in baptism.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*A Baptist Union charter entitled 'Children and the Church' stated: "The full diet of Christian worship is for children as well as adults." How much of that "full diet" are the children in your church involved in? How much should they be involved in?*

## **Children and Baptism**

It is a matter of debate amongst Baptists whether or not older children may be baptised. No Baptist questions the need for baptismal candidates to be believers. The question rather centres around the stage at which a person can make a meaningful commitment to Jesus Christ. Is a simple 'decision' to follow Jesus sufficient? Many Baptists in the USA believe it is, and as a result it is not uncommon for children as young as six or seven to be baptised. In other parts of the world, baptising children so young would be unthinkable.

Many argue that it is not sufficient for a prospective baptismal candidate to love Jesus as Saviour - rather they must be able to own him as Lord. Furthermore, owning Jesus as Lord, they contend, should involve some understanding of Mark 8.35 (as distinct from simply John 3.16), for the call to discipleship is a costly call to the way of the cross. Such an understanding is well-nigh impossible for a child, and implies that normally mid-adolescence is the earliest period when baptism might be meaningful.

However, in delaying baptism we must be careful not to down-play the validity of children's earlier experiences of Christ. Jesus himself said that to enter the kingdom we must 'receive the kingdom as a child', i.e. we must receive the good news of the kingdom as a child receives it. Children can and do receive the good news of the kingdom.

Perhaps the answer to when children may be baptised, is to recognise that conversion is a process, with baptism marking the end of the first stage of that process. There is much to be said for Baptists re-introducing the concept of the 'catechumenate'. The word 'catechumenate' comes from a Greek verb meaning to 'instruct' and was used in the early

church for people (young and old) preparing for baptism. When children accept Jesus as their Saviour, they can be encouraged to join a group of other children who have begun to go the way of Jesus and there receive appropriate instruction and encouragement prior to the time when they come to commit themselves fully in the waters of baptism. As a sign of their being 'children on the way' they could be given a card featuring the words of John 3.16 and the following statement, dated and signed on behalf of the church by the minister: "We are delighted that you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour and we look forward to the day when you confess him in baptism". In this way the faith of the child would be taken seriously - but so too the nature of believers' baptism.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Someone has likened baptism to marriage and argued that, since both involve making public vows and binding yourself to another in faithfulness for life, "youthful desire and enthusiasm are not enough to qualify for baptism". What do you think and why?*

### **Children and Church Membership**

Once a person is deemed eligible for baptism, that moment too they are eligible for church membership. There are no theological grounds for the custom found in a few Baptist churches of imposing a minimum age for church membership, even though there may be no minimum age for baptism. This does not necessarily mean that every 'child' or young person has to be given voting rights at a church meeting. As we shall argue later, to be able to vote at a church meeting is far from the essence of church membership.

Whether or not children or young people are formally members of the church, the Baptist theology of children implies a commitment on the part of the church to care for all the children in its charge. There is an increasing recognition amongst Baptists that children are individuals in their own right and are therefore as much in need of pastoral care as older people in the church. Thus, for instance, in times when a family suffers from the effects of divorce, death or redundancy, children need as much support as their parents.

### **Children and the Lord's Supper**

One consequence arising from the Baptist theology of the child, is that children do not actively participate in the Lord's Supper. Children may be present at such a service, but until they have fully committed themselves to Christ and his church through baptism and church membership, they may not share in the bread and the wine.

Amongst a small minority of Baptists there is a move to follow recent practice amongst Anglicans by encouraging the participation of children and allowing them to receive the bread. In theory for Anglicans this may make sense, because at least such children have been 'baptised' as infants. However, many Baptists regard such a practice as unacceptable. The Lord's Table, they argue, is for the Lord's people, and within the context of a Baptist church the Table is open in the first place only to those who have committed themselves to the Lord and his people in the waters of baptism. Children need to be recognised, but this is not the most helpful way of giving recognition.

## **5. LIVING TOGETHER IN COMMUNITY**

### **A Baptist understanding of Church Membership**

At the heart of Baptist faith lies a radical concept of the church, rather than a particular view of baptism. To put it another way, the Baptist doctrine of believers' baptism stems from the Baptist doctrine of a believers' church.

For Baptists the church is a community of believers gathered together out of the world, who have committed themselves to Christ and to one another. Traditionally Baptists have spoken of this dual commitment in terms of a 'covenant'. It is this covenant theology which lies behind the Baptist concept of church membership.

Baptists do not believe in an individualistic approach to the Christian faith. The reverse is the case: where Baptists are true to themselves, they have a high doctrine of the church. Hence their stress on the responsibilities and privileges of church membership.

Many coming from other Christian traditions find the Baptist emphasis on church membership somewhat strange. For Anglicans and Roman Catholics church membership is much less clearly defined. For instance, it is sometimes difficult to know what a member of the Anglican church actually is. Is it someone who has been baptised, or is confirmation a necessary adjunct? Or is membership of an Anglican church to be equated with registration on the parish electoral roll or attendance at Easter communion?

By contrast in a Baptist setting there is no room for doubt. Admittance to church membership usually involves a series of stages: after the initial application, the candidate is interviewed by representatives of the church; a report is brought to the church meeting which not only decides upon the person's fitness for membership but also in turn decides to commit itself to that person; finally the candidate is formally admitted to church membership and welcomed with the 'right hand of fellowship, normally given at a celebration of the Lord's Supper. As we have already seen, church membership also normally presupposes believer's baptism.

It is important to stress the Baptist understanding of church membership goes far beyond admittance to a church roll: it is rather a dynamic process and is about 'living together in community'. Although Baptist churches may have their constitutions, such constitutions are not at the heart of the Baptist understanding of church membership. First and foremost church membership is about covenant relationships. It is this relational model of church membership which undergirds the radical nature of the Baptist way of being the church.

What are the Scriptural grounds for this Baptist understanding of church membership? Is church membership, as understood by Baptists, a necessary expression of one's commitment to Christ, or is it possible to belong to a church without being a church member? To help us answer such questions, we need to consider a number of basic New Testament principles.

### **JESUS CALLS US INTO COMMUNITY**

In the first place, church membership is our response to the call of Jesus to belong to a community. Jesus did not simply call people to follow him, he called them to follow him

*together*. The term "church" is only found twice in the Gospels (Matt 16.18; 18.17), but the thought is implicit throughout (see the metaphors of 'flock' and 'vine' in John 10 and 15).

It is implicit in the fact that Jesus chose twelve disciples. Twelve was not just a fortuitous number. It is significant that Jesus did not go metric! Twelve was the number of the tribes of Israel. By choosing twelve men to be with him, Jesus was declaring to the world that he was in the process of recreating the people of God.

Neither is it fortuitous that the first reference we have to the term 'church' comes in the context of Peter's confession of faith (Matt 16.16,18). It was in response to Peter's declaration: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matt 16.18). Personal faith and membership of the new community, the church, go hand in hand. Neither can be separated from one another - the two are indissoluble.

Commitment to Christ, therefore, inevitably involves commitment to his people expressed in church membership. In this sense Cyprian, one of the early church fathers, was right when he declared: "Outside the church there is no salvation". It is not that a person is saved by becoming a church member, but that church membership is an inevitable concomitant of salvation. As Paul discovered on the Damascus Road, Christ cannot be separated from his people - for the question "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9.4) revealed that to persecute Christ's followers was tantamount to persecuting Christ himself. To put the same truth another way, when through faith in Jesus we are 'born again', we become members of the family of God. Personal faith has a corporate dimension.

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*What do Acts 2.41-42 and 1 Cor 12.13 say about a link between personal faith and membership of the Christian community?*

This analogy of the church as a family brings out the truth that our relationships with one another in the church are a gift from God and not a matter of personal choice. Just as in a human family we may find ourselves with brothers and sisters who belong to us, whether we like it or not, so too in the family of God we are surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ, none of whom we have chosen, but nonetheless all of whom belong to us and we to them. In the world at large we may be able to pick and choose our friends, but in the church our brothers and sisters have been given to us by God. Such is the nature of Christian community.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*How does the principle that in the church "we may find ourselves with brothers and sisters who belong to us, whether we like it or not", apply in practice, for example to membership of a church home group?*

Furthermore, membership of this new community has definite and clear boundaries. This is evident in Jesus' other reference to the term 'church'. In the context of the brother who sins and refuses to heed brotherly admonition, members of the new community are called upon to "tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector" (Matt 18.17). Church discipline implies church membership. It is not without significance in this respect that 'discipline' along with the 'preaching of the Word of God' and the 'administration of the sacraments', was seen by Baptists, as well as by the Reformers in general, to be an essential mark of the church.

## BAPTISM INITIATES US INTO COMMUNITY

For Paul, baptism was not merely a personal confession of faith, it was also a rite of initiation into the body of Christ, that is the church. So to the Corinthians he wrote: "By one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (1 Cor 12.13). Paul was not alone in seeing a corporate dimension to baptism. Luke concludes his account of the Day of Pentecost with the words: "Those who accepted his [Peter's] message were baptised, and about 3000 were added to their number that day" (Acts 2.41). Baptism initiated these new converts into a community. This thinking is paralleled elsewhere - for instance in Jewish proselyte baptism those Gentiles who were baptised were seen as identifying themselves with the people of Israel.

### Local Church – Universal Church

For some, the point of issue is the extent to which baptism initiates a person into the local church, as distinct from the church universal. But how real a question would this have been for members of the early church? To them the local church was the expression of the church universal. It was unthinkable to belong to the one without belong to the other. "You are the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12.27) wrote Paul to the church at Corinth. Note the subject: "you". The apostle was not asserting that the church at Corinth was part of the wider church - it *was* the church - in Corinth. To be baptised into the body was to be baptised into the expression of the body of Christ in Corinth.

Church membership for the first Christians was no optional extra. It was inevitable. Free-wheeling Christians not meshed into the life of a local congregation simply did not exist. Just as it is impossible to belong to the army without belonging to a particular unit, so from a New Testament perspective it is inconceivable to belong to the wider church without belonging to a particular local unit

### Wide Choice – No Choice

Today the situation is bedevilled by the fact that we have a choice in a way that the first Christians did not. We can choose between this church and that, whereas the first Christians had only one church to which to belong. That does not invalidate the fact that church membership has little meaning unless it involves active participation in the life of a local church. The local church is the expression of the wider universal church. This point is brought out well in the 1948 *Baptist Union Statement of the Church*:

It is in membership of a local church in one place that the fellowship of the one holy catholic Christian church becomes significant. Indeed, such gathered companies of believers are the local manifestation of the one Church of God on earth and in heaven. Thus the church at Ephesus is described, in words which strictly belong to the whole catholic Church, as 'the church of God, which he hath purchased with His own blood' (Acts 20.28). The vital relationship to Christ which is implied in full communicant membership in a local church carries with it membership in the church which is both in time and eternity, both militant and triumphant. To worship and serve in such a local community is, for Baptists, of the essence of church membership.

*TO THINK ABOUT.....*

*How do you respond to the argument that an individualistic approach to baptism fails to understand the importance of community in Christian faith in general and Baptist life in particular? Can you imagine any situation where it would be right to baptise without that person becoming a church member?*

### **THE LORD'S SUPPER PRESUPPOSES COMMUNITY**

The Lord's Supper is a re-enactment of the Last Supper. On that occasion Jesus gave his disciples bread and then wine, with the words, "This is my blood of *the covenant*" (Mark 14.24). In the Jewish context of a Passover meal, a covenant implied a covenant people. Jesus in establishing a new covenant was recreating the people of the kingdom - the church that was to inherit it and be its instrument. The Lord's Supper was never intended to be a private rite. First and foremost, it was - and is - a fellowship meal, which presupposes community.

The communal aspect of the Lord's Supper comes to clear expression in 1 Cor 11.17-34, and in particular verses 27 & 29:

"Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord... For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves."

Paul criticised those who through their social divisions failed to express their oneness in Christ around his Table. "The body" which they failed to discern is the body of Christ, the church. They failed to realise that the whole church is the body of Christ.

Those who refuse to become church members and yet who eat the Lord's bread and drink from his cup, make a similar mistake. They would share in the family meal - and yet refuse to be part of the family. They want the privileges of church membership, but not the responsibilities. This is not Christ's way.

This is not an argument for closing the Lord's Table to all but members of one local church – or for closing the Table to all but those who have been baptised as believers. The Table must be open to 'all who are in good standing' with their local church, wherever and whatever it might be. The important point is that the Lord's Supper presupposes community. It is the fellowship meal of the committed.

Commitment 'to one another' is expressed through church membership. In most Baptist churches this commitment is symbolised through extending 'the right hand of fellowship'. This practice dates back to New Testament time: in Gal 2.9 we read how James, Peter and John gave to Paul and Barnabas 'the right hand of fellowship'. In other words, they recognised them as fellow workers in the gospel. This is what 'the right hand of fellowship' is still about: a recognition of our oneness of spirit and purpose.

*TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Does the phrase 'all who are in good standing' with their own local church satisfy the criteria for who should attend the Lord's Supper? Do Baptist today need to think again about 'fencing the Table'?*

## THE CHURCH MEETING IS A CHARISMATIC EXPRESSION OF COMMUNITY

Church membership is viewed frequently in terms of attendance at Church Meetings, whether they be held monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly. This is seen by some as of the essence of church membership. Just as the constitution of the Athenian 'ecclesia' or '(political) assembly' was democratic, with all citizens having equal right of speech and vote, so it is often argued that the constitution of a Baptist church is democratic, with all members having equal right of speech and vote. But this is a false understanding of church membership and the Church Meeting, which has its roots in late Victorian and Edwardian times. Up until then Baptist church meetings were about finding a *consensus*.

Because of the importance of the importance of the subject, we shall deal with the church meeting later in greater detail. Suffice it to say here, the church meeting is not a democratic institution - but 'theocratic' in nature. In the words of the Baptist Union 1948 *Statement on the Church*, the church meeting

"is the occasion when as, individuals and as a community, we [the members] submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and stand under the judgement of God that we may know what is the mind of Christ".

Members come together to seek *God's* will, and not *their* will. The church meeting is not an occasion when rights may be exercised, but when gifts may be used. For God gives various gifts to his church - gifts, for instance, of leadership and discernment, of wisdom and prophecy. At a church meeting we come to share these gifts as we seek to discern the mind of Christ for our life together. It is no exaggeration to say that the church meeting is a charismatic expression of community.

### *TO THINK ABOUT*

*Recall some specific issues on agendas of recent church meetings you have attended. How were those issues handles? How was each occasion used (or could have been used) to discover the mind of Christ rather than the will of individuals?*

## MEMBERSHIP IS COMMUNITY

### Responsible Church Membership

There is a danger that church membership can be perceived as something static - to be entered upon and then left behind. Thus in becoming a church member one becomes a name upon a roll. But that is an inadequate view of church membership. Church membership is something which is dynamic and which carries ongoing responsibilities. For some Baptists these ongoing responsibilities revolve around the church meeting. They view church membership primarily in terms of having a right and a duty to attend such meetings and to exercise one's vote accordingly. But, as we have seen, this is a blinkered view. First and foremost church membership is about commitment to Christ, which in turn leads to commitment to one another. Entering into church membership involves entering into a relationship whereby we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ's kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost.

This commitment to one another may be expressed through the church meeting. Thus John Smyth, in his pre-Baptist, 'Independent' days, wrote of the church meeting:

If you knew the comfort and power of the Lord's ordinances of admonition and excommunication as we do (blessed be our God) in some measure, and that growth and reformation which is in some of us thereby, you would be so wonderfully ravished with the power of God's ordinances, that you would acknowledge the Church to be terrible as an army with banners, and yet amiable and lovely, comely and beautiful.

This understanding of the church meeting is alas far removed from many Baptists today, for whom the church meeting centres upon *issues*, whether they be finance, fabric, or mission. For the first Baptists, church meetings centred on *people* - hence their preoccupation with matters such as church discipline.

### **Small Groups**

In many Baptist churches today the 'home fellowship group' has taken over some of the activities of the church meeting, as originally understood. This may not be a backward move, provided it is understood that in such groups we are exercising the 'responsibilities and privileges of membership'.

In any church larger than fifty members, fellowship groups are of the essence of its life together. Only as a church is broken down into small groups can people begin to relate together and to meet one another's needs. Ideally every church member should relate to a fellowship group and through the group relate to others.

Fellowship groups are vital, because they offer opportunity for meaningful fellowship: there love can be expressed, life can be shared, maturity can be developed, and gifts can be discovered. All this, reflected in the New Testament teaching of "one anotherness" (see John 13.34,35; 1 Cor 12.25; Gal 6.2; Eph 4.15,16; 1 Thess 5.11; Jas 5.16), is church membership!

## **COVENANT AND COMMUNITY**

### **An Early Emphasis**

Our Baptist forebears talked of covenanting together. John Smyth and his followers at Gainsborough in 1606 covenanted together "to walk in all Christ's ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them". Smyth defined a "visible community of saints" as "two or more joined together by covenant with God and themselves... for their mutual edification and for God's glory". God covenanted to be their God, while Christians entering this covenant agreed to obey all God's commandments. Christians also had a duty to each other as believers, which Smyth termed "the duties of love".

This concept of church membership as entering upon a covenant together was common in earlier days. In the Baptist church at Frome, Somerset, for example, prospective members had to subscribe to a three point covenant. These were (i) to be regular in worship; (ii) to care and be cared for in the Lord; and (iii) to accept financial responsibility for the ministry.

## **‘Responsibilities’ of Membership**

Baptist churches today often draw up a list of ‘responsibilities’ of church membership, but frequently the notion of covenant is missing. Without the concept of commitment to one another, which is of the essence of a church covenant, these lists of ‘responsibilities’ risk becoming rule-centred rather than people-centred.

Here is an example of a list of responsibilities:

- To live a life consistent with the Gospel and worthy of our high calling in Christ.
- To spend some time every day in prayer and reading the Scriptures.
- To share every Sunday, unless unavoidably prevented, in the corporate worship of the church.
- To accept personal responsibility for the government of the church by attendance at the church meetings.
- To take some part in the work of the church according to gifts and opportunities.
- To live in fellowship with all the other members of the church, serving one another in love.
- To set aside a realistic proportion of our income for the work of God carried on in and through the church.
- To introduce others to the fellowship of the church and engage in corporate and personal evangelism.

## **Covenanting Together**

Recently there has been a recognition among Baptists of the need to rediscover their roots and realise afresh that, in becoming church members, we enter into a covenant together, which involves ‘covenant relationships’. This is the logical consequence of our response to the new covenant that God has established with us through his Son's life, death and resurrection, as also through the sending of the Holy Spirit: he has covenanted with us to be our God, we have covenanted to be his faithful people, and so we have covenanted to belong to one another in the body of Christ. Just as David and Jonathan made a covenant together (1 Sam 18.3,4) and thereby strengthened one another's hands in God (1 Sam 23.15,16), so we as church members enter into such a relationship with others that we too can strengthen one another's hands in God.

## **Covenanting together as a small group**

Some churches have encouraged their small groups to become covenant groups. One church adopted the following challenging statement to illustrate its philosophy of covenant groups:

"Covenant groups are an expression of our life in Christ and cannot reach their potential unless everybody is an active member of the group. Our life and strength flow from Christ; therefore we can take joy in his presence and express what he is accomplishing in our group as a member of it. His Word is our guide to all of life and therefore it should be used as the groups feel the need. It is out of his Word that we identify the following covenant dynamics:

- The covenant of **Affirmation** (unconditional love, *agape* love). There is nothing you have done, or will do that will make me stop loving you. I may not agree with your actions, but I will love you as a person and do all I can to hold you up in God's affirming love.
- The covenant of **Availability**. Anything I have - time, energy, insight, possessions - are at your disposal if you need them. I give these to you in a priority of covenant over non-covenant demands. As part of this availability I pledge regularity of time, whether in prayer or in agreed upon meeting time.
- The covenant of **Prayer**. I covenant to pray for you in some regular fashion, believing that our caring Father wishes his children to pray for one another and ask him for the blessings they need.
- The covenant of **Openness**. I promise to strive to become a more open person, disclosing my feelings, my struggles, my joys and my hurts to you as well as I am able. The degree to which I do so implies that I cannot make it without you, that I trust you with my needs and that I need you. This is to affirm your worth to me as a person. I.e. I need you!
- The covenant of **Sensitivity**. Even as I desire to be known and understood by you, I covenant to be sensitive to you and to your needs to the best of my ability. I will try to hear you, see you and feel where you are, to draw you out of the pit of discouragement or withdrawal.
- The covenant of **Honesty**. I will try to 'mirror back' to you what I am hearing you say and feel. If this means risking pain for either of us I will trust our relationship enough to take that risk, realising it is in 'speaking the truth in love, that we grow up in every way into Christ who is the head'. I will try to express this honesty, to 'meter it', according to what I perceive the circumstances to be.
- The covenant of **Confidentiality**. I will promise to keep whatever is shared within the confines of the group in order to provide the 'permissive atmosphere' necessary for openness.
- The covenant of **Accountability**. I consider that the gifts God has given me for the common good should be liberated for your benefit. If I should discover areas of my life that are under bondage, 'hung up' or truncated by my own misdoings or by the scars inflicted by others, I will seek Christ's liberating power through my covenant partners so that I might give to you more of myself. I am accountable to you to 'become what God has designed me to be in his loving creation'".

### **Covenanting together as a church**

Another church adopted the following prayer as part of its annual covenant renewal service. Although not as detailed as the example of a small group covenant, the promises it contains are still very demanding.

Lord Jesus, you are Lord of our lives and Lord of your church.  
 We will +act in love toward one another.  
 We will care for one another.  
 We will support those you have called to lead us.  
 With your help we resolve to do our best to preserve the unity of your church.

Lord Jesus, you wish to enter the hearts and lives of everybody.  
We will pray for those who have yet to respond to your love.  
We will invite friends to come to our church.  
We will make our church a place where strangers feel at home.  
With your help we resolve to do our best to make disciples.

### **Covenanting together as a Baptist Union**

The Baptist Union of Great Britain produced *Covenant 21 - A Covenant for a Gospel People*, first used at the Baptist Assembly in 2001, with a view to being used in local churches and associations. The essence of the covenant is found in the following two covenant prayers

Creating and redeeming God,  
we give you thanks and praise for your covenant of grace  
made for our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
We come this day to covenant with you and with companion disciples  
to watch over each other  
and to walk together before you in ways known and to be made known

This day we give ourselves again to the Lord and to each other  
to be bound together in fellowship  
for the sake of the mission and glory of God.  
Celebrating our shared life,  
we commit ourselves to belonging and working together  
in our congregation, our local partnerships,  
our Association, and our Union of churches.  
We pledge all that we have and all that we are  
to fulfil God's purposes of love

### **Church Discipline**

It is within the context of covenant relationships that meaningful church discipline can be exercised. In many Baptist churches today church discipline is exercised only when any hope of meaningful fellowship is gone and we remove the offender from our membership roll. But this is a caricature of church discipline.

As earlier generations of Baptists well understood, church discipline is an aid to spiritual growth, and not a sign of spiritual death. Discipline is not a form of punishment, but rather is remedial in intent. Paul could write: "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6.1). Discipline - along with encouragement - is an expression of loving care. "Truth" can only be spoken - and received - "in love" within the context of covenant relationship. Furthermore, discipline needs to be exercised not just towards the 'grosser' sins of adultery or dishonesty, but also toward the less overt sins of pride and envy, which can be even more disruptive of Christian fellowship.

Ron Sider, who though not a Baptist linked into our Anabaptist roots, threw light on covenant relationships when he defined true Christian fellowship as "an unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other brothers and sisters, emotionally, financially and

spiritually". This is surely what church membership is all about. Certainly this is how Luke describes church membership in the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Those who accepted Peter's message on the day of Pentecost were baptised and added to the church (Acts 2.41) and then devoted themselves to the fellowship (Acts 2.42).

This then means that when we vote people into membership at our church meetings, we are committing ourselves to them, to stand by them and love them, whatever the cost. This is a radical concept of church membership - but true to the New Testament Scriptures and true, too, to our roots. Baptists are radical believers!

*TO THINK ABOUT...*

*Tony hadn't tried to hide it. He had admitted to the incident, and Roger, the minister, knew it was a matter for church discipline and many hours of pastoral counselling. He wasn't helped by the conflicting wisdom of two experienced deacons: Martin said that in every case of church discipline it was kinder and in the best interests of all if the leadership dealt with the matter; while Joan said she believed that in most cases, with few exceptions the church meeting should be the place in which matters of church discipline were shared and resolved. Who do you think had the stronger case? How should Roger proceed from here?*

## 6. LIVING UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

### Authority among Baptists

#### GOD RULES HIS PEOPLE

##### Theocracy

Democracy - 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' - in the world of politics is an ideal to treasure. But in the church this ideal does not apply. 'Jesus is Lord', we declare: his will alone must reign supreme. Any church laying claim to be a Christian church cannot operate on purely democratic principles. It will rather seek to pattern its life on 'theocratic' lines: i.e. it should seek to be ruled by God. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt 6.33) will be the dominating motive as we live our lives together.

What does it mean to be a theocracy? How does God rule his people? It is at this point that Christians are divided. The following are the main views on the issue:

- God rules through bishops (**episcopacy**)
- God rules through elders (**presbyterianism** - found not only in Presbyterian churches, but also in many 'new' churches)
- God rules through church councils (**connexionalism**, as practised for instance in Methodism)
- God rules through church meetings made up of members of a local church (**congregationalism**).

It is this last model which Baptists, along with Congregationalists, have adopted. John Smyth said that the congregation, "saints as kings", rule the church. Unfortunately congregational church government is often confused with democratic church government - in the same way that believer's baptism is often confused with adult baptism. However, as the Congregational theologian P.T. Forsyth wrote, congregationalism "was the mother of political democracy, but not its child". To say that God rules through his people gathered together in church meeting is not to say that God rules through the ordinary democratic process. Rather, in the fine words of Baptist Union's 1948 *Statement of the Church*, the church meeting

"is the occasion when as individuals and as a community, we submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and stand under the judgement of God that we may know what is the mind of Christ".

Or, to adopt another definition, the church meeting is

"the place where all members meet together regularly and, in an atmosphere of prayer, share their deepest spiritual concerns and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit about all the matters which affect their common life as the family of God" (Daniel Webster).

##### The Local Church's Authority

For Baptists the church meeting is paramount. This has major implications as far as wider denominational life is concerned. If ultimate authority is to be found in the members of a local church meeting together in the name of Christ, then all forms of hierarchy are inevitably

swept away. Whereas other churches are pyramidal in structure, with a pope, an archbishop, or a chairman of conference, at the 'top', in a Baptist church the pyramid is inverted. The church is not subject to any human authority figure, whether within or without the church: rather it is *served* by deacons, elders, ministers, and indeed by other church officials beyond the local church.

From this understanding of the local church the Baptist Union of Great Britain, in its declaration of principle, states as its first basis of union:

"That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practise as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws".

A Baptist church is a self-governing church. Although it will associate with other Baptist churches and express a very real measure of interdependence, it always possesses an independency of judgement and decision. This Baptist practice of church government puts all the emphasis on the local church. So much so that commonly Baptists do not speak of their denomination being a *church*, but rather a *union* of churches. The local church is where the heart of Baptist life is to be found.

## THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

No thinking Baptist would claim that the 'congregational model' is exactly patterned on the New Testament church. In the first place, nobody knows for sure how the early church operated - the minute books of the Jerusalem church, for instance, are not open to inspection! In the second place, it is clear that church structures varied from place to place. What was possible in Jerusalem was not possible in Asia Minor - there were not twelve apostles for every church! On the other hand, there are certain principles enshrined in the New Testament which Baptists believe remain valid for today:

### **The Lordship of Christ**

First and foremost the church is not, as some Baptists have argued, 'the fellowship of believers'. It is, in the words of J.H. Oldham, "Jesus Christ at work in the world through the fellowship of redeemed sinners". Or put more simply in Biblical terms, the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor 12.27; Eph 4.12), the bride of Christ (Rev 19.7), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6.19). The church - whether local or universal - is only the church in so far as it relates to Christ as its Redeemer and its Head (see Eph 4.15; Col 4.18). The church cannot therefore be reduced to a purely human organisation. This means that in its life together the church is not called to be democratic (ruled by the majority) or despotic (ruled by the powerful few), but Christocentric (ruled by Christ). Jesus must be Lord!

#### *TO THINK ABOUT*

*Do you agree the term 'fellowship of believers' puts too much emphasis on the church as 'a purely human organisation' and so diverts attention away from understanding the church as the creation and agent of Christ?*

## **The Priesthood of All Believers**

This principle, stated in 1 Pet 2.4,5,9, declares that the age-old distinction between priest and people has been superseded. We are all priests - in the letter to the Hebrews, all Christians are by implication high-priests (see Heb 10.19-22).

In our relationship with God there is no need for any human mediator between God and man: Jesus is the one mediator (1 Tim 2.5). In spiritual terms we are all equal before God. No one group has a greater claim on the Holy Spirit than another. In our relationship with others we are called to represent Christ to one another and the world. For this is the priestly task: to build bridges between God and his world.

In the light of these two aspects of priesthood, there is good reason for believing that every church member can be open to God and his Word. No one spiritual elite can claim to have a special hotline to God.

## **The Ministry of All Believers**

A number of passages could be cited supporting this doctrine, but the chapter which particularly comes to mind is 1 Cor 12. Here Paul develops the picture of the church as a body. God has so designed the body that the involvement of every person with his or her special gift is necessary for the proper functioning of the community. Every member has a unique role to play: the body is weaker where members withdraw and do not play their parts. Yes, there are particular leadership roles given by God to certain individuals, but these individuals do not have a monopoly of the Holy Spirit. For best results all God's people are needed to pull together.

## **The Church Meeting in the New Testament**

The theological principles outlined above are reinforced by Luke's description of the early church in action. When decisions of fundamental importance had to be made, the whole church was involved in seeking the mind of Christ. Three passages come to mind:

1. **Appointing Leaders- Acts 6:** When the first 'deacons' were appointed, it was left to the church - and not to the apostles - to choose seven men "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom... They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them" (Acts 6.3,6). It would appear that the church had the primacy in all arrangements relating to the appointment of the Seven. Thus although scholars debate as to whether or not the 'ordination' of the Seven was by the apostles or by the church in general (the original Greek is a good deal vaguer than the present NSRV translation and in fact suggests that Luke was referring to the church, rather than the apostles only, laying hands on the Seven), there is no doubt that the ceremony was under the direction of the church. The church meeting did not simply have a *say* in the appointment of the Seven: it *made* the appointment.
2. **Administering Finance - Acts 11.** Having heard Agabus' word from the Lord, "The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11.29-39). Although it is dangerous to read into the silences of Scripture,,

it does seem significant that the disciples, and not the elders alone, were involved in the decision-making process. The role of the apostles, it appears, was to carry the gift to Jerusalem.

3. **Admitting members - Acts 11.** At the Jerusalem Council called to discuss the question of the admission of Gentile members into the church, although the apostles and the elders took the initiative in thrashing through the matter, the church as a whole was involved in making the decision to welcome Gentile believers into their midst. Luke records that "the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided" (Acts 15.22). Later in that chapter he quoted the letter from the Jerusalem Council, which described that decision in terms of it seeming "good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15.28). God guided his people through prayerful discussion together. Interestingly, Luke tells us that when Judas and Silas arrived in Antioch with the letter detailing the decisions of the Jerusalem Council, "they gathered the congregation together" and "delivered the letter" (Acts 15. 30). Here the church rather than the church leaders were the primary recipients of the letter..

In the Acts of the Apostles, whether in the election of leaders, the administration of finance, or the admission of members, the whole church was involved. Of course, the apostles and elders had key roles to play, yet it was not they who 'ran' the church, but rather the church as a whole was involved in major decisions involving its life.

### **The Teaching of Jesus**

The experience of the early church is not sufficient. Our final authority must be the Lord Jesus himself, and it is in Matthew's Gospel where the foundational text for the church meeting is to be found: viz. Matt 18.15-20. When an erring member of the church refuses to listen to you, and you have gone on to try and speak to the member in the presence of one or two others, then, says Jesus, you are to "tell it to the church" (Matt 18.15-17). The church in this context has authority to "bind" (GNB: "prohibit") and "loose" (GNB: "permit"): i.e. the church has the final authority to pronounce what is or what is not sin (Matt 18.18).

Here Jesus makes clear that the ultimate recourse in discipline is not the elders or other church leaders, but the church itself. By inference, what is true of church discipline is also true of other issues that affect the church: the church has final authority in every matter which affects its life.

To these verses Matthew adds another saying of Jesus: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them" (Matt 18.20). Although the primary application is to the disciples' prayer for the sinner of vv15-17, the principle of Jesus' presence amongst his people cannot be confined to that particular situation. Jesus is present wherever and whenever his people gather in his name. With specific reference to the church meeting we may argue that the church's ability to make authoritative decisions rests upon the presence of the Risen Christ in its midst. It is as Christ's people consciously meet in his name and seek his will in prayer that authority is to be found.

1 Cor 5 provides a clear example of the kind of church discipline Jesus had in mind. Paul tells the church at Corinth: "When you are assembled [i.e. in what we would call the church meeting]... you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his

spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5.4,5). Note, the discipline Paul has in mind is not to be exercised by the elders, but by the church. The final authority lies within the church meeting.

*TO THINK ABOUT.....*

*Does it matter to you that you have a share in the decision-making task of your church, or would you rather hand over that responsibility to the leaders? Is your answer shaped by the Bible, your temperamental preferences or how much you trust and respect your leader?*

## **AUTHORITY**

### **Power to the Pastor?**

The question of 'authority' has become a central issue in Baptist churches. After a period when many a Baptist minister was often more or less regarded as the paid servant of the church, there to fulfil every whim of the congregation, the pendulum has swung. There has arisen a recognition of a minister's calling to lead the people of God. Influenced often by some of the 'new churches', Scriptures are appealed to which appear to give real 'power' to pastors and other church leaders.

### **The Biblical basis**

The Apostle Paul writes:

"The household of Stephanas... have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people and everyone who works and toils with them" (1 Cor 16.15,16).

"We appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord, and admonish you" (1 Thess 5.12).

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5.17).

Similarly the unknown author of Hebrews writes:

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let me do this with joy and not with sighing – for that would be harmful to you" (Heb 13.17).

To these Scriptures we could add Gal 1, where Paul wrote that he - and by inference leaders in general - was in the first place a servant of God, and not a servant of men: for he was "sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through "Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1.1); hence he concludes that if he is "still pleasing people" he would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal 1.10).

Similarly in Eph 4.11 it is the Risen Christ who "gives" pastor-teachers to his church: it is

from Christ that pastor-teachers derive their authority, and therefore it is to Christ that they owe their allegiance.

### **Servant Leadership**

The above passages are not as unambiguous as might at first sight seem. We cannot argue from these Scriptures that the New Testament encourages any form of autocracy, where authority is imposed and unthinking obedience expected. Whatever authority Stephanas and his household enjoyed (1 Cori 16.15,16), it was clearly authority which derived not so much from their position as from the way in which they gave of themselves in service to the church. This is still true today: ultimately people obey their leaders not because of what they say but because of who they are and how they lead through serving. This is a servant leadership.

Unfortunately some English translations of 1 Thess 5.12 are more specific than the original Greek text. Paul does not speak of elders "ruling", but of "being over" God's people. Whereas the former term suggests power, the latter term is softer in tone. The Greek verb here was used of 'patrons', who had their clients' interests at heart - it was, for instance, used in connection with Phoebe who was a "benefactor" of many people in Cencreae (Rom 16.1,2).

In 1 Tim 5.17 the point at issue is not power, but reward. Most English versions speak of double "honour": however, the GNB is almost certainly more accurate and speaks of "double pay" for those who work hard at preaching and teaching. In many churches ministers would do well if they received a salary comparable to the average pay of their deacons, let alone twice the average!

Finally in Heb 13.17, although the writer expects the recipients of his letter to "obey" their leaders, the underlying Greek verb emphasises that blind obedience is not what is in mind. The root meaning of the verb is "to persuade", which suggests that the author has in mind a response to reasoned exhortation rather than authoritarian command. Pastoral leadership in the New Testament is non-coercive; it leaves people free to accept or not accept its direction. Furthermore, Heb 13.17 should be balanced by Heb 12.15, which implies that the ministry of 'episcopal' oversight was shared by the whole congregation. A literal rendering of this verse, which as the context shows is addressed to the church as a whole (see Heb 12.14), gives the following translation: "[All of you] should exercise oversight (*episkopountes*) lest anyone fails to obtain the grace of God".

### **Accountability of leaders**

For all the above reservations, from a New Testament perspective leaders are expected to lead. Leadership carries with it a certain authority, which resides partly in the kind of people the leaders are, but also in the role which they are called to fulfil.

This, however, is not the full picture of authority within the local church. For although leaders may be accountable to God (e.g. Gal 1.1,10; Heb 13.17), they are also accountable to the church, which has recognised their calling and set them apart for service (Acts 13.1-3; 14.27). Hence, the church has the right not only to encourage its leaders, but also to admonish them. For example, Paul tells the church at Colossae to say to one of its leaders, "See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord" (Col 4.17). Exhortation was not all one way! Honour and respect may be due to ministers and other church leaders, but there are

times when they too need to be given direction - not by some outside 'apostle', but by the church which they serve.

In this respect the implications of Paul's account of his relationships with the apostles in Jerusalem is instructive (see Gal 2.1-2,6-9,11-14). The fact that Paul could rebuke Peter and Barnabas for their hypocrisy in their dealings with Gentile Christians, is a specific illustration of the more general truth, that authority given to leaders must always be evaluated: are those leaders exercising their authority properly? If even Peter and Barnabas could get it wrong, then so too can Christian leaders today!

As we have seen, ultimate authority rests in the meeting together of the church's members, and not with the elders or other leaders within the church (Matt 18.15-20). Not surprisingly, therefore, we find in Luke's account of the early church that the church as a whole was involved in crucial questions relating to membership, leadership and finance (Acts 6, 11,15). Similarly at Corinth we find the church taking the responsibility for disciplining a church member (1 Cor 5).

*TO THINK ABOUT.....*

*The church meeting had spent an hour discussing the possible appointment of a youth minister. Rachel stood up and said, "Why can't we leave this matter to the deacons and elders to decide? After all, we set them apart to be our leaders. Shouldn't we give them freedom to lead us in what they believe is God's way for us?" How would you respond to Rachel's comments?*

### **Living with Tension**

In this matter of authority within the church there is a very real tension: on the one hand, leaders are invested with authority; on the other hand, the church has ultimate authority. How then, do we resolve this tension? The answer is that we cannot - or if we do, then we become unbalanced and untrue to the teaching of the New Testament. We need to recognise that sometimes we have to live with tension in the Christian life.

This is true too of some of the great doctrines of the faith are concerned. There is tension present within the doctrine of the incarnation: Jesus is fully man, yet he is fully God. Resolve the tension, and that moment heresy is introduced. Tension is likewise present in the Christian doctrine of Scripture: it is inspired by God, yet it is written by people. Similar tensions are found in the doctrine of 'free will' over against the doctrine of 'election'. Tension is inherent in our faith and cannot be avoided. What is true of Christian doctrine in general, is true likewise of our understanding of authority within the church.

Accountability does not rob the pastoral office of authority. Rightly understood, the church in appointing its leaders has delegated to them authority, which the leaders are free to exercise until the church withdraws its recognition of them. Leadership is a God-given role within the church: leaders are *servicing the church* as well as their Lord in exercising their leadership gifts. A church, therefore, which refuses to allow its leaders to lead is rejecting God's gift to them of pastoral ministry (see Eph 4.11,12). This does not mean that church meetings rubber-stamp their leaders' decisions, for leaders are part of the body of Christ, and their insights need to be tested along with those of others (1 Cor 12.10). They too are accountable to the church meeting.

On the other hand, a church will not lightly put to one side any recommendation coming from its leaders. Any church meeting should think hard and long before overturning a unanimous recommendation of the deacons with regard, for instance, to budget proposals for the forthcoming year. However, no leaders are infallible - not even the minister! The church meeting is the rightful place for testing all major proposals for church life, irrespective of from where they come.

### **The Final Authority is Christ's**

Baptists in their life together have sought in various ways to give expression to the authority of the church meeting over against the authority of leaders. John Smyth, for instance, spoke of the church as "the owner and primary possessor of the treasury, and the chief lord of it under Christ: and unto the Church must account finally be made". Similarly he declared, "The body of the church, the spouse of Christ, ruleth as the wife under her husband, according to the will and appointment of her husband: the elders rule as the stewards of Christ the king, and of the church which is the wife or spouse of the king".

An example of this principle in practice is provided by the minutes of the Baptist church in Amersham, which in 1675 stated:

"If elder or deacon or elders or deacons shall assume any power or prerogative above the church and contrary to the words that the church shall judge and the Lord by his word shall give defined sentence and if any difference fall out between elder and member or deacon and member and it be brought orderly to the church that both shall stand by and the church shall judge according to God's word".

These examples illustrate that for early Baptists the doctrine of the church meeting and their understanding of its authority was in no way to be confused with democracy. The church meeting was - and is - a means of discovering the mind of Christ. The final authority is Christ's. In the words of the declaration of principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, "our Lord Jesus Christ...is the sole and absolute authority"; churches meet to "interpret and administer *His* Laws". 'Jesus is Lord' must ever be the motto of every church meeting.

## **THE CHURCH MEETING IN ACTION**

### **A Demanding and Exciting Model**

The Baptist model of the church meeting is exciting. Every member has a part to play. Every member counts. Yet at the same time it is a highly demanding model. It expects much from the membership, and it expects much from the church meeting. Thus at church meetings business cannot be limited to rubber-stamping decisions relating to finance and fabric. Instead it involves the seeking of the mind of Christ in relation to all matters of faith and practice. In principle there is nothing which is outside the orbit of the church meeting, for there is nothing outside the orbit of Christ. Matters of social and even political concern are all matters for a church meeting agenda.

This point needs to be emphasised. Church meetings worthy of their name should be wide-

ranging in character. The church's internal domestic concerns should not be primary. Issues such as sex education and young people, the plight of the homeless, the mentally ill and community care, the challenge of AIDS to church and society, should be on the agenda - along with such other important issues as developing an evangelistic strategy and the admission of new members.

Consideration is given also to the effective deployment of the gifts God has given his people. This involves not only discerning the gifts, but also encouraging people to use them. Furthermore, a wise church will want to ensure that people exercise their gifts within the local community, and not just within the church. This in turn means that the church meeting will be involved not only in the selection and appointment of its leaders, but will also be in encouraging suitably gifted members to serve in the wider community, for instance, as magistrates, local councillors, or school governors.

In other words church meetings need to focus on the larger issues of life. Matters of detail such as the colour of the ladies' toilet and the state of the church kitchen should be left to the deacons or some other appropriate sub-group within the church.

### **Discovering the Lord's Will**

How in practice is the Lord's will sought? At times the leadership will bring to the church recommendations. The church will normally accept these, unless there are strong and compelling reasons not to. At other times members from the floor of the meeting will make suggestions or proposals. In the process of seeking the Lord's will some voices will carry more weight than others. People will listen with particular respect to those who are perceived to be 'mature' and 'spiritual'. Yet there are times when the Lord seems to by-pass even the 'wise' of the church! There must therefore be opportunity for all voices to be heard.

At all times views expressed must be carefully tested. It is not for nothing that along with the gift of "prophecy" the Lord gives the gift of "discernment" (1 Cor 12.10; see also 1 John 4.1). As part of the testing process votes may be taken. This need not be an unspiritual act. For unlike the normal democratic process, a mere majority in a meeting which is seeking the mind of Christ will never be sufficient. If Christ is guiding one, then he is likely to be guiding all. Consensus therefore is vital. Certainly in dealing with matters of any importance a considerable majority of those present should believe that the particular course of action is of the Lord. If a majority is not gained, then the proposition must be dropped and the will of the Lord further sought - if necessary at a subsequent church meeting.

It is because the actions and decisions of a church meeting transcend the normal democratic process that the custom of postal voting is inappropriate. This custom, found in some Baptist churches, arose from a desire to allow members unavoidably prevented from attending a church meeting (e.g. parents with young children, people away on business, the sick and the aged) to have their say on matters of importance in the life of the church. However, the church meeting is not about people having their say - it is about discerning the mind of Christ. This process of discernment involves a sensitive listening to others and a careful weighing of what has been said. Decision-making of this kind is very much a corporate spiritual experience, in which the gathering together is an essential element in the prayerful discovery of God's will (see Matt 18.20).

### *TO THINK ABOUT....*

*Ian has been appointed a shop steward in the huge industrial plant near the church, and Avril has been appointed as a magistrate. Their minister was determined to think of ways to help the members at the next church meeting to understand the potential significance of these appointments; affirm Ian and Avril in their 'callings'; and devise ways of supporting and encouraging them in their ministry. How could the church members achieve these three goals?*

### **When Members Disagree**

Sadly, there are times when we fail to live up to our ideals and unseemly power games are played. John Weaver expressed it this way:

"Sin will show up in arguments. Power struggles, envy and jealousy will sadly exist. People will want to avoid difficult decisions, such as discipline, and fill agendas with trivial issues that should have been delegated. Others will want to conduct the meeting like a political debate or a secular business meeting. Church meetings are the high risk zone of our Baptist church life. They are places where we must learn to disagree in Christ, and be prepared to consent to his will expressed through the meeting of his people, even when we are opposed to the decisions. It may be that we need sometimes to hear the words that Cromwell addressed to the Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1650. He pleased that they should ask themselves whether all that they had done was infallibly agreeable to the word of God. 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken'."<sup>5</sup>

Members are free to disagree; but they are not free to express their disagreements in an unloving way. We must always heed the words of Paul and "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4.15). When emotions are running high, it is helpful to establish ground-rules and so ensure that everything is "done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14.40). For example, the person leading the meeting might ask that those wishing to speak from the floor should

- put up their hands and wait to be asked to speak
- come to the front
- limit themselves to two minutes
- only speak once

### **Frequency and Time**

Baptist churches vary as to the frequency of church meetings. Some hold them monthly, others only bimonthly or even quarterly. The less frequently church meetings are held, however, the more they tend to degenerate into 'business' meetings preoccupied with the internal issues of the church, with little time for discussion of or reflection on some of the larger and more important issues.

There is much to be said for monthly church meetings. Agendas can be less full, with the result that a church can be more genuinely engaged in its task of discerning the mind of Christ concerning the varied aspects of its mission. Where there are important issues at stake, more time can be allowed to process of decision-making: a proposal, for instance, can be

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<sup>5</sup> John Weaver, *The Church Meeting* (Baptist Basics series), Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 1993

introduced in an unpressurised way at one meeting with a view to a decision being made the following month. Furthermore, regular church meetings can also aid better communication within the life of a church.

We also need to consider the times of church meetings. Since Victorian times church meetings in Britain tend to be held during the week. However, with the increasing pressure of life, mid-week meetings have been in decline - and correspondingly mid-week church meetings have tended to be relatively poorly attended too. Creative thinking is needed. Perhaps we need to return to earlier Baptist practice and hold church meetings on a Sunday. One possibility is to follow the Sunday morning service with a church meeting after a suitable break for coffee; alternatively, the church meeting could take place on a Sunday afternoon - the provision of Sunday lunch as also of activities for children encourages a far higher turn-out than would otherwise be present mid-week.

### **Themes for the Agenda**

There is no one pattern for church meetings. Customarily church meetings begin and end with prayer. However, in so far as church meetings are an exercise in discerning the mind of Christ, there is much to be said for allowing the whole meeting to be permeated by prayer. Some churches stop half-way through their agenda and devote twenty or thirty minutes of prayer to matters already discussed or about to be dealt with. Rather than seek to set out a standard church meeting agenda, it would perhaps be more helpful to list three items that should appear any church meeting agenda:

1. **Worship.** Time at the beginning of the meeting needs to be devoted to worship of the Lord whom we seek to serve and whose will we seek to discern. Worship will include not only hymns and songs and prayers, but also the reading of Scriptures relevant and appropriate to the agenda. God must be allowed to speak.
2. **Fellowship matters.** At every church meeting there should be an opportunity for news of the fellowship to be shared, and for this news to become fuel for prayer. Fellowship matters will include applications for church membership. In British Baptist churches it is now customary for two members of the church to visit the prospective member on behalf of the church, and bring a brief report to the church meeting. In other countries - as also in Britain prior to the 1930s - it is sometimes the custom for prospective members to come to the church meeting to share their testimony directly with the church.

Occasionally fellowship matters will include the sad business of church discipline: for just as it is the church which receives people into church membership, so it is the church which ultimately excludes people from church membership. Clearly this latter action is only taken when the sin is gross and there is no evidence of repentance. Normally the full details of the offence are not shared nor is lengthy discussion encouraged. Pastoral discipline is one of those matters which the church delegates to its leaders, and where the church members need to be able to trust their leaders.

Fellowship matters need to include a regular (annual?) pruning of the church roll. The pruning of the roll encourages

- integrity: it is not right for a church to claim a higher membership than is the case

- commitment: it is difficult to urge people to take their membership responsibilities seriously, when there are members who have not attended the church for years.
- church growth: growing churches tend to be churches with high commitment - where "membership is not viewed as a destination, but rather as a pilgrimage that leads one towards unreserved discipleship and a higher level of religious commitment" (Lyle Schaller)

Roll revision is painful, and yet - in the words of Jesus' parable of the vine - a branch is pruned "to make it bear more fruit" (John 15.2).

3. **Mission.** Each agenda should contain at least one item relating to the mission of the church - whether it be evangelism or social action. The church must always be outward looking, remembering the world for whom Christ died.

Although everything else is secondary to the worship, fellowship and mission, there will always be other items on the agenda. Furthermore, there must always be an opportunity for individual members to raise matters which are on their hearts - although in many churches notice has to be given prior to the church meeting. The church meeting is also the ideal occasion for any 'words' from the Lord to be shared - and tested.

## CALLING A MINISTER

An illustration of the Baptist approach to authority is found in the way in which Baptist churches call a minister. Unlike most other mainline churches, where a minister's appointment is influenced from outside by ecclesiastical figures (e.g. bishops) or church councils (e.g. synods), albeit sometimes in consultation with representatives of the local church, amongst Baptists it is the local church itself which has the primary responsibility in calling its new minister. True, in a British situation, churches will usually consult their regional minister, who will suggest 'names;' to the church. But it is up to the church whether or not it feels right to follow up those suggestions. So how does all this work out in practice?

### **The Role of the Deacons**

In Britain it is generally the deacons who initially act on behalf of the church, receiving names not only from the regional minister but also from church members and other sources. (Elsewhere this task is sometimes delegated to a specially constituted 'pastoral vacancy committee' or 'search committee').

Before an approach is made to anyone, it is helpful to draw up a church profile. This in turn is submitted to the church meeting for approval. The profile, amongst other things, normally speaks of the hopes and aspirations of the church for the next phase of ministry.

After the church has considered and approved its own profile, and the information gleaned about the various names given as potential future pastors of the church, individuals are then approached - normally one at a time - with invitations to meet with the leadership to explore possibilities of future ministry. There is much to be said for also asking for and following up references for the prospective pastor. If all goes well and there seems to be a good 'match', the individual concerned is invited to 'preach with a view' and meet with the church.

## **The Role of the Church**

At this stage the matter is more or less out of the hands of the deacons. The deacons should make a recommendation to the church meeting, but the decision in calling the person concerned rests now with the church, not with its leadership. With the issuing of a 'call' the matter is finally resolved. However do note that the person being called is also involved in decision-making, with the result that the call only becomes a reality once both the church and the minister are convinced that God is indeed in this call.

All this may sound complicated and time-consuming, and so it often is. No doubt the process of calling a minister would be much simpler and swifter if the matter were left to some figure with 'apostolic' authority. But for Baptists such a procedure would run contrary to their perception of the way major decisions should be reached. Christ rules his church through his people, which in turn involves the church meeting.

### **A PASTOR'S DREAM**

#### **I have a dream of a church meeting**

- where everybody comes prayerfully prepared
- where members have to struggle to find a seat
- where there is an overwhelming sense of family
- where the voice of praise is never absent
- where Scripture is allowed to speak
- where 'prophets' are heard
- where experiences of God are shared
- where people listen with discernment
- where feelings are balanced with reason
- where faith is vibrant
- where everybody expects God to speak
- where business flows out of worship and worship flows out of business
- where the needs of the world are uppermost
- where Kingdom issues prevail
- where details are happily delegated
- where there is a genuine seeking after the mind of Christ
- where debate has been replaced by discussion
- where personal prejudices are set aside
- where the leadership is trusted
- where the voices of the few no longer dominate
- where nobody feels they have to speak on behalf of 'other people'
- where angels' advocates constantly look for good things to say
- where nobody ever feels uptight
- where nobody seeks to win
- where differing viewpoints are shared in love
- where the old are prepared to learn from the young
- where the young are able to share their dreams
- where constitutional niceties recede into the background
- where God has his way

## IN CONCLUSION

Here again we have an example of Baptist radicalism. Baptists dare to entrust all the major decisions of their life together to the church, believing that this is God's way for his people to discern the mind of Christ. Needless to say, there is no guarantee that the church meeting will always rightly discern Christ's mind. Church meetings can sometimes be dominated by the personal feelings of members rather than by a desire to do the Lord's will, whatever that involves. There is no such thing as an ideal church meeting, for even the best we can offer God is spoiled by sin. Baptists do not always live up to their ideals, but this does not mean that an alternative and less radical model of decision-making should be adopted. Rather, as is true of the Christian life in general, Baptists are called constantly to become what by God's grace they already are - people living under the lordship of Christ.

The great Congregational preacher of times past, R.W. Dale, said: "To be at church meeting is for me one of the chief means of grace". Although Baptists cannot pretend this is true of all church meetings, they do believe that there is no finer instrument for discerning the mind of Christ. For those belonging to a local Baptist church, after worship centred at the Table, there are few greater privileges of helping to discover and decide what God would have his church be and do.

## 7. ASSOCIATING WITH OTHERS

### Baptists are not Independents

#### THE BIBLICAL BASIS

Fellowship is the lifestyle of the Gospel. By faith we are born again into the great family of God, a family which transcends all boundaries of race, culture, and language. In the words of the Apostle Paul, in the fellowship of the church "there is no Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free" (Col 3.11) - for we "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28). Not surprisingly Luke describes "fellowship" as one of the hallmarks of the life of the early church (Acts 2.42).

This fellowship in the Gospel cannot be restricted to Christians worshipping together in one locality. No individual Christian can afford to be a loner, neither can any local church afford to go it alone. If a local church goes its own way regardless of other churches, then by its very individualism it is denying the fulness of the Gospel. A church which fails to live in fellowship with others is a gross mismutation, and is no longer a living cell within the wider body of Christ.

An examination of the New Testament quickly reveals that the young churches of that period had a very keen sense of belonging to a wider fellowship. Two examples come to mind in particular: one financial, the other doctrinal.

#### Finance

When the mother church in Jerusalem suffered economic hardship, the daughter churches rallied round and took up a noteworthy collection (1 Cor 16.1-4; 2 Cor 8.1-9.15; Rom 15.25-28). It is significant that the underlying Greek word *koinonia* (fellowship) could be used in a concrete sense to denote a "gift" or "contribution": the "collection" (*koinonia*) which Paul took up was a sign of fellowship (see Rom 15.26). Fellowship, if it has any meaning at all, has to be expressed, and that expression has no geographical limitations. Paul's injunction to the Galatians to "work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Gal 6.10) could not be restricted to any particular locality.

#### Doctrine

When a major issue of faith and practice cropped up in the church at Antioch, they decided to involve the mother church in Jerusalem and not deal with the matter by itself. At the resulting 'Council of Jerusalem' the agreed guidelines were sent out not just to the church in Antioch, but also to the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15.23). Clearly the churches had a corporate sense of identity. Fellowship in the Gospel involved consulting with one another and coming to agreements with one another. Interdependency rather than independency was a hallmark of the early church's life.

#### Local and Universal

Unfortunately some Baptists, in their desire to emphasise the importance of the local church, have fallen into the error of isolationism. While it is true that the vast majority of references to the church in the New Testament have the local church in mind (according to one

calculation, more than 100 of the 114 instances of the term '*ekklesia*' [church] denote the local church), this does not justify ecclesiastical isolationism. The church is at one and the same time both local and universal.

Hence for Paul not only is the local church the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11.13), but also the universal church (Eph 5.25-33). Likewise the local church (1 Cor 12.27) and the universal church (Eph 4.15,16; Col 2.19) can be termed the body of Christ. Similarly the writer to the Hebrews sees the local church in its worship opened up to the universal church (Heb 12.18-24). Baptists, with their radical perceptions of the local church, must be mindful of the wider church too.

## BAPTISTS AND ASSOCIATING

### Associating Locally

From almost the very beginning Baptists recognised the importance of local churches 'associating' with one another. In 1644, for instance, representatives of seven Particular Baptist churches met together in London to produce a confession of faith. In the preamble of that confession they underlined their conviction that

"though we be distinct in respect of our particular bodies, for conveniency sake, being as many as can well meet together in one place, yet all are one in communion, holding Jesus Christ to be our head and lord; under whose government we desire alone to walk".

Furthermore, this "communion" was to receive concrete expression:

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

At a meeting of church representatives at Tetsworth, Oxfordshire, in 1653, the churches signed an agreement acknowledging mutual interdependence and agreed to confer on three matters:

- advice on controversial matters which could not be resolved by one church on its own;
- the provision of financial support for any of the congregation in need;
- the common planning, for the greater glory of God, of anything which required "the joint carrying on of the work of the Lord that is common to the churches".

These three areas of co-operation parallel the early church: the first area is reminiscent of the Council of Jerusalem; the second recalls the Collection for the Jerusalem poor; and the third may be compared to the decisions which emerged from the leaders' conference in Jerusalem when Paul, Barnabas and Silas met with James, Peter, and John, to discuss missionary strategy (Gal 2.1-10).

As far as the early Baptists were concerned, the principle of association beyond the local church was an extension of the privileges and responsibilities of fellowship within the local church. The church representatives meeting at Wormsley in October 1652, prior to the meeting at Tetsworth declared:

"There is a like relation betwixt the particular churches each towards other, as there is betwixt particular members of one church. For the churches of Christ do make up but one body or church in general under Christ their head... We conclude that every church ought to manifest its care over other churches as fellow members of the same body of Christ in general."

In other words, 1 Cor 12.12-27 has an application beyond the local church. The body of Christ, of which we are part, is the wider church. Associating with other churches is no optional extra - it is part of being the church.

### **Associating Nationally**

This emphasis on associating with one another became a Baptist distinctive. Historically as also theologically Baptists have been committed to interdependency. The independence of the local church is not the be all and end all of Baptist life. True, "each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [God's] laws", but this extract from the Baptist Union of Great Britain's declaration of principle needs to be read in context. The declaration of principle is immediately followed by "the objects of this union", which under the general umbrella of "the advancement of the Christian religion", are:

1. To cultivate among its own members respect and love for one another, and for all who love the Lord Jesus Christ
2. To spread the Gospel of Christ by ministers and evangelists, by establishing churches, forming Sunday schools, distributing the Scriptures, issuing religious publications, and by such other methods as the Council shall determine
3. To afford opportunities for conference and for united action on questions affecting the welfare of the churches, the support of the ministry, and the extension of the denomination, both at home and abroad
4. To promote fraternal relations between Baptists in this and other countries
5. To obtain and disseminate accurate information respecting the organisations, labours and sufferings of Baptists throughout the world
6. To confer and co-operate with other Christian communities as occasion may require.

In other words, churches in membership with the Baptist Union are not just committed to the principles enshrined within the declaration of principle, but also to the objects of the Union. Membership involves more than a commitment to a particular way of believing, it also involves commitment to the wider Baptist family and to other Christian communities.

### **Freedom to Disassociate**

It is important to understand that although the independency of the local church may not be the be-all and end-all of Baptist life, it is nonetheless of the essence of Baptist life. First and foremost Baptist churches are independent churches - they are only interdependent by choice.

Baptist churches are always at liberty to dissociate themselves from decisions made by Association or Baptist Union Councils. Not even the Baptist Union Assembly can make decisions which have binding force over a local church. So, for instance, when after much debate the Baptist Union Assembly decided to commit itself to the new ecumenical 'instruments' following the ending of the British Council of Churches, no church which disagreed with that decision was required or expected to leave the Union.

This freedom to disassociate is based on the liberty of each local church to interpret the mind of Christ. On the other hand, it is also true that in the task of seeking the mind of Christ, while not being under the authority of any other person or group of churches, "a congregation marked by spiritual wisdom will seek the fellowship and counsel of other members of the one body of Christ" (Brian Haymes).

## **ASSOCIATING TODAY**

The local church apart, associating today may take place at a number of levels. Apart from the Strict Baptists (who have formed their own associations) and a handful of 'independent' Baptist churches, in England and Wales every Baptist church belongs to a regional Baptist associations, and most Baptist churches also belong to the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

### **The Baptist Union of Great Britain**

The Baptist Union of Great Britain – often branded as 'Baptists Together' - has a resource centre at Didcot, Oxfordshire, and shares its premises with BMS World Mission. However, the Baptist Union must not be equated with its resource centre at Didcot. The Baptist Union is the 2000 or so member churches themselves. With the Baptist emphasis on the local church as self-governing and self-financing, the Didcot centre should never be regarded as 'HQ'. All key decisions for front-line mission are made by the local church. The Baptist Union has no power of authority over any individual church. That is why Baptists do not refer to their Baptist denomination as 'the Baptist Church', but rather to the 'Baptist Union' - a union of autonomous and interdependent churches.

With its emphasis on the key role of the local church, there is no place for hierarchy within the Baptist Union. Significantly, the most senior member of the Didcot staff, to whom a good deal of responsibility is delegated, is not termed the 'Director' but the 'General Secretary' of the Baptist Union. There is, however, one position of particular 'honour' in the life of the Baptist Union: every year a Vice-President (who the following year automatically becomes the President) of the Baptist Union is directly elected by the ministers and churches.

### **Regional Associations**

At a regional level Baptist churches co-operate together in associations. Like the Baptist Union itself, the associations are mission agencies. All the many functions of association life are, in principle at least, subservient to that mission.

An association is best placed to be more user-friendly than the Union by virtue of being regional rather than a national body. Whereas the latter normally only meets once a year in 'Assembly', when representatives of all the local churches are invited to meet together, the

meetings of the former tend to be more frequent and more geographically accessible

## Five Core Values

An integral feature of the reforms undergone at the beginning of the century was the adoption by the Baptist Union Council of ‘Five Core Values for a Gospel People’ with a view to encouraging churches, associations and colleges to incorporate these values into their life and work. The preamble to the ‘five core values’ deserves to be high-lighted:

“Because of the way we understand the biblical message, our Baptist emphasis is on trusting and following Jesus together in Christian discipleship. Our identity as Christian people is determined by the life of Jesus. We believe that this involves living in radical commitment to him. Taking this seriously will challenge all the assumptions and practices of our life together. We are called to follow him, doing as he did and giving ourselves to God’s loving purposes in the world....

We follow Jesus not simply as individuals. As Baptists we emphasise the significance of the gathered church. Our understanding of church is not hierarchy or organisation, but essentially as Community in Christ. Relationships are critical to the working out of our salvation...”

It is within such a theological framework that the five core values are set out as follows:

### A Gospel people called to be .....

- **A prophetic community.** Following Jesus in... confronting evil, injustice and hypocrisy; challenging worldly concepts of power, wealth, status and security
- **an inclusive community.** Following Jesus in... transcending barriers of gender, language, race, class, age and culture; identifying with those who are rejected, deprived and powerless
- **a sacrificial community.** Following Jesus in... accepting vulnerability and the necessity of sacrifice; seeking to reflect the generous, life-giving nature of God
- **a missionary community.** Following Jesus in... demonstrating in word and action God’s forgiving and healing love; calling and enabling people to experience the love of God for themselves
- **a worshipping community.** Following Jesus in... engaging in worship and prayer which inspire and undergird all we are and do; exploring and expressing what it means to live together as the people of God, obeying his Word and following Christ in the whole of daily life.

In 2014 the Baptist Union Council, building on these five core values, committed ‘Baptists Together’ to intentionally developing a culture where we

- **Seek to be a movement of Spirit lead communities** – As those who have encountered the living Christ, to intentionally seek his will and purpose for our local churches and every expression of our shared life. (Gal 5:22-25)
- **Feel like one team**– celebrating diversity; valuing, respecting and trusting each other as we work together in partnerships - making sure everyone feels included and listened to. (I Cor 12:24b-27)
- **Embrace adventure** – being serious about discipleship, willing to take risks,

pioneer and move out of the comfort zone of familiar ways of doing things. (Matt 28:18-20)

- **Inspire others** – with a generosity of spirit, to energise and motivate people to be all that God created them to be. (Eph 5:1,2)
- **Share a hunger of God's coming kingdom**– nurturing a 'holy discontent' that arises from our desire to give practical expression to our vision of God's purpose for creation - confronting evil, injustice and hypocrisy and challenging worldly attitudes to power, wealth, status and security both within and beyond our Union. (Matt 6:9, 10)

## **Baptist Colleges**

Another expression of association is the way in which Baptist churches in the United Kingdom have come together for the purpose of providing theological education and ministerial formation. Today there are six Baptist colleges in Bristol, Cardiff ('South Wales'), Paisley ('Scottish'), London ('Spurgeon's'), Manchester ('Northern'), and Oxford ('Regent's Park'). All six colleges are in membership with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, but are at the same time independent bodies.

## **BMS World Mission**

BMS World Mission (as the Baptist Missionary Society is now known) is a classic example of Baptists associating together for the purposes of mission. Founded in 1792, the BMS preceded the founding of the Baptist Union - indeed, historians tell us that it was the formation of the BMS which provided the impetus for the formation of the first Baptist Union amongst Particular Baptist churches in 1812-1813.

BMS World Mission serves as the 'mission agency' for the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Union of Scotland, and the Baptist Union of Wales, and offers an opportunity for churches within three Baptist unions not only to associate with one another, but also with the Baptist conventions and unions with which the BMS World Mission in partnership overseas.

## **Baptist World Alliance**

Baptist forms of association go beyond regional and national boundaries. The Baptist World Alliance, founded in London in 1905, and serviced by a small international resource staff based in Virginia, USA. comprises some 47 million Baptists in 126 countries. It describes its aim as 'Networking the Baptist Family to impact the world for Christ'. The BWA has often played a major role in helping minority Baptist groupings gain recognition from governments hostile to the Christian faith; it is also active in providing help to third world countries through its Baptist World Aid programmes.

## **ASSOCIATING WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS**

The same principles that motivate Baptists to associate together, should also motivate Christians in general to associate together.

## **The Ecumenical Movement: A Gospel Demand**

The modern ecumenical movement dates from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. This was the first really international conference of a multi-denominational character, and although its theme was 'mission', it was inevitable that the degree to which the various bodies represented could co-operate was never far off the agenda.

The seeds of ecumenism were found in mission. Rightly understood, unity has never been for the sake of unity, but rather for the sake of mission. In this context the words of Jesus in the so-called 'high-priestly prayer' are important: "I ask... that they may all be one... so that the world may believe you have sent me" (John 17.20-26). Mission is hindered by disunity. Thus the Indian Christian leaders who came together at Tranquebar in 1919 - shortly after the Edinburgh Missionary Conference - declared:

"We face together the titanic task of the winning of India for Christ - one fifth of the human race. Yet confronted by such an overwhelming responsibility, we find ourselves rendered weak and relatively impotent by our unhappy divisions - divisions which we did not create and which we do not desire to perpetuate".

What was true in India then, is still true the world over. It is difficult for Christians to preach a Gospel of reconciliation and yet at the same time to be unreconciled with one another.

### **Baptists and Ecumenism**

World-wide the Baptist response to the ecumenical movement has been cautious. Only a minority of Baptist unions and conventions are in membership with the World Council of Churches (WCC). Yet even those unions and conventions, which feel unable to become formal members of the WCC, recognise there is a need to relate to other denominations. Baptists cannot pretend that they alone are the Lord's people!

The Baptist Union of Great Britain from the first has had a positive attitude toward the ecumenical movement. One of the original founder members of the WCC in 1948 - as it had also been a founder member of the former British Council of Churches in 1942 (succeeded in 1990 by the Council of Churches in the British Isles and now by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland), it has always felt that the things that unite us are more important than the things that divide us, and that it could more effectively witness to its Baptist distinctives from within the ecumenical movement rather than by standing on the side-lines.

### **The World Council of Churches**

With the exception of the Roman Catholics, all the main churches and denominations of the world are members of the WCC. These include not just the great Orthodox churches, but also some Pentecostal churches. Theologically the WCC is a tremendous mixture. Thanks to the involvement of Baptists and others, it is to be noted that evangelicals are becoming increasingly influential within the WCC.

At the first assembly of the WCC the following resolution was passed:

"The WCC is composed of churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ as God and

Saviour. They find their unity in Him. They do not have to create their unity; it is the gift of God. But they know that it is their duty to make common cause in the search for the expression of that unity in work and life."

This is an important statement: the churches and denominations in membership with the WCC recognise that spiritually they are already "all one in Christ Jesus". But this unity needs to find greater expression. Spiritual realities must be given embodiment in this world if they are to count for anything. How is the world going to believe, if it sees the church divided into literally thousands of different and differing groupings?

In 1961 at the New Delhi Assembly the WCC sharpened up their basis of belief into its present form:

"The WCC is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures, and therefore seeks to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit".

It is important to note that this basis includes:

- confession of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour
- commitment to the Scriptures
- stress on the Trinity

For all its apparent minimalism, this basis of faith does include three vital statements, the implications of which are major.

### **Churches Together in Britain and Ireland**

In the UK the ecumenical movement took a significant step forward in 1987 with the formal entry of the Roman Catholics into the new ecumenical 'instruments'. The old British Council of Churches was disbanded and in its place came 'Churches Together in Britain and Ireland'.

Initially the Roman Catholic presence gave concern to many Baptists. The Scottish Baptists, who had been members of the British Council of Churches, decided that they could no longer be full members of the new Council of Churches in the British Isles, and of the new Scottish ecumenical body, Action of Churches Together in Scotland. The situation in Wales is somewhat complicated - some churches are members of "Cytyn" ("Together": i.e. Churches Together in Wales), but others are not. The Baptist Union of Great Britain is a member both of the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland and of Churches Together in England..

The Baptist Union of Great Britain was attacked for its commitment to the inter-church process. One critic, for instance, declared that the Baptist Union:

"has accorded official recognition to the pagan system of Rome with its blasphemous teaching of the mass, its worship and veneration of Mary, the intercession of the saints, and its rejection of 'sola Scriptura', its salvation by works, its superstition and its idolatry".

This criticism is neither fair nor true. It does not recognise the great changes that have taken

place among Roman Catholics since Vatican II in the early 1960s; nor does it recognise that Baptists in co-operating with Roman Catholics are not thereby passing over those fundamental differences which still divide.

The differences between Roman Catholics and Baptists are sometimes not so great as are imagined – in fact sometimes the differences between Roman Catholics and Baptists are less than between Baptists and Christians from other traditions. An increasing number of Roman Catholics seek to be Biblical Christians, in the sense that they are keen to study God's Word and to treat it as authoritative, not least with regard to some of today's ethical challenges.

### **Churches Together at local level**

Thankfully, the concerns and the hesitations of many Baptists which accompanied the participation of Roman Catholics in Churches Together in Britain and Ireland have for the most part disappeared at local level. Today up and down the country Baptists are committed to working together with other churches in making the gospel of Christ known. There are some 2,500 'Churches Together' groups in England. In many towns and cities Churches Together is the natural umbrella for activities such as Street Pastors and Food Banks.

### **Baptists and Evangelicals**

As the most evangelical mainline denomination Baptists form a natural bridge to evangelical churches and parachurches which often do not feel able to be part of the ecumenical movement. A large number of Baptist churches, for instance, belong to the Evangelical Alliance, which tends to be the umbrella under which many of these groups work. Baptists are to the fore in such major evangelical gatherings as Spring Harvest and the Keswick Convention. They are actively involved in many evangelical parachurch organisations, such as Scripture Union and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship.

However, Baptists - in the Baptist Union of Great Britain at least - do not feel it right to limit their fellowship to like-minded evangelicals, but rather seek to associate with all God's people. In the words of the 1965 Baptist Union report on Baptists and Unity:

"Christian unity is of great importance, urgency, and complexity; whilst there is an undeniable spiritual unity binding together all believers to our Lord Jesus Christ and to one another, this needs to be given visible expression in a clearer and more unmistakable manner than at present".

#### *TO THINK ABOUT*

*William Carey said: "I am more than ever anxious to know no man after his sect as an Independent, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist or Baptist. Everyone who bears the image of Christ and brings beauty and fertility to the desert around him is 'my brother and sister and mother'. Let us conscientiously profess our own convictions; but let us love but little the man of our own sect who possesses little of the image of Christ, while we love him exceedingly in whom we see so much of Christ, though some of his opinions are contrary to our own. So shall we know we are passed from death into life and sectarian quarrels will cease". Do Carey's remarks represent a helpful way for Baptists today to approach the ecumenical movement?*

## **8. SERVING ONE ANOTHER**

### **A Baptist concept of ministry**

From their beginning Baptists have treasured the Reformation principle of the 'priesthood of all believers'; not for them a clerical hierarchy. Baptists believe that all God's people have equal access to God, and that in turn they have equal responsibility to serve God. While there are differences in function, in terms of status all God's people stand on the same footing before God. Taken seriously, such a doctrine has radical implications for the 'ministry' in which all God's people are involved.

The English words 'ministry' and 'minister' are derived from the Latin for 'service' and 'servant'. Thus we can argue that if all God's people are called to 'serve', then by definition every Baptist (as every Christian) is a 'minister'. Interestingly, the Greek words for 'ministry' and 'minister' are *diakonia* and *diakonos*: we might therefore also argue that every Baptist is called to be a deacon! In fact, it is more helpful to see the meaning of *diakonia* and *diakonos* pointing to the servant nature of the church: the function of its appointed 'ministers' or 'servants' is to lead the congregation in its varied tasks of Christian 'service'.

British Baptists tend to call their pastors 'ministers'. Although many are happy with this title, it could be argued that its very use in this specialised sense by implication is a denial of the ministry of all God's people. In other countries more functional terms like 'pastor' or 'preacher' are more common. However, ultimately titles are unimportant. It is the underlying principle which is important: all God's people are called and gifted for service.

*TO THINK ABOUT*

*Do you agree that titles are unimportant?*

### **THE MINISTRY OF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE**

#### **Ministry within the Gathered Community**

This doctrine of every-member-ministry is based on the New Testament as a whole. but comes to the fore in particular in Eph 4.11-12 where Paul writes of the Risen Christ:

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry".

Here we see that ministry for Paul is ministry of the whole people of God - it is not confined to apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

#### **Gifted for Ministry**

In line with their calling, all God's people are gifted for ministry. This is the teaching of Paul in Rom 12.4-8 and 1 Cor 12.4-12, as also of Peter in 1 Pet 4.10-12. For example, Paul prefaces the list of gifts in 1 Cor 12.9-10 with the words, "To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor 12.7), and concludes "All these [gifts] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit

chooses” (1 Cor 12.11). Gifts are given to all God's people. Strictly speaking, therefore, all God's people are ‘charismatic’ (i.e. ‘gifted’ - the term comes from the Greek *charisma* = gift). For many Baptists the movement known as ‘charismatic renewal’ has been a helpful reminder of this fact.

It is this radical belief that all God's people are ‘ministers’ which underlies the old Baptist custom, still practised in many churches, of following baptism with the laying-on-of hands. Here prayer is made that the baptismal candidates be filled afresh with the Spirit of God and thus empowered for service (see Matt 3.16; Acts 1.8; 8.17). Or in the words of a prayer from *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*:

"Living and gracious God, you have called *A* to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a citizen of your kingdom. Pour out your Spirit that *she/he* may be empowered for service and strengthened for witness. Lavish your gifts of grace and the fruits of your Spirit upon *her/him*, that *she/he* may live to serve and praise you and grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray."

For Baptists the church membership roll is - or at least should be - the ‘ministry roll’ of the church. In the words of the old cliché, we are ‘saved to serve’.

### **Ministry in the World**

Ministry is not to be confined to the sphere of the church alone. That is evident in the prayer quoted above which speaks of "service in the Church and the world". Baptists influenced first by pietism and more recently by charismatic renewal have sometimes been unduly inward-looking. The temptation of many a Baptist minister has been to organise so many activities within the church, that there has been precious little time and space available for service in the wider world. Increasingly Baptists are recognising that service in the community and even political action can be valid forms of Christian ministry.

Although most of this chapter is devoted to the Baptist understanding of ministry within the church, for most Christians their primary sphere of service is not in the church but in the wider world in which they live. The role of ministers is not so much to equip their people for working as volunteers in the church, as rather to equip them to serve God in the world.

We need to be aware of the importance of the workplace, where many Christians spend 50%, if not more, of their waking time. It is there where we are called to be as ‘salt’ and ‘light’ (see Matt 5.13-16). Work is more than a means of earning money, it is a way of contributing to the needs of others and as such is a form of Christian ministry. This is well illustrated by one American Baptist who wrote:

“What we have often failed to see is that the contractor who builds houses, the lab technician who tests for cancer, and the postal worker who bridges the gap between other distant friends are all engaged in a caring ministry even though it is unlikely they will ever intimately know the persons they serve”.<sup>6</sup>

Churches need to pray for regularly for those at work, and not least for those involved at the

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Broholm, ‘Towards claiming and identifying our ministry in the workplace’ 151-152 in *The Laity in Ministry*, edited by George Peck & John Hoffmann (Judson, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania 1984).

sharp end. It is highly disturbing to hear one church member say: "I spend an hour a week teaching Sunday School and they haul me up to the front of the church to pray for me. The rest of the week I'm a full-time teacher and the church has never prayed for me."

There is much to be said for churches regularly interviewing members about their work, asking such questions as:

- What do you do for a living?
- What are the issues that you face in your faith in the context of your daily work?
- How would you like us to pray for you as a church in your ministry from Monday to Friday?

In turn ministers need to preach on work-related issues. Topics could include: a theology of work, vocation, ministry at work, witness at work, dealing with bosses, being in authority, success, failure, ambition, leisure, rest, money, debt, pressure, and time management. All this should not be forgotten as we explore the more ecclesiastical dimensions to ministry!

## **LEADERSHIP: THE MINISTRY OF SOME**

### **The Biblical Basis**

All God's people are called to serve, but not all are called to lead. As Paul makes clear, God gives many and various gifts. "If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, but one body" (1 Cor 12.19,20). Most of God's gifts relate to ministry in general. Some, however, relate to the ministry of leadership in particular.

Thus in 1 Cor 12.28 Paul says, God has given to the church those with gifts of "leadership". The underlying Greek noun literally means 'helmsmanship'. It was a term often used metaphorically in Greek literature of the art of government: the statesman guiding the 'ship of state'. Here in 1 Cor 12 the ship in question is the church. Within the context of every-member-ministry there are those specially gifted to 'preside' over the church, guiding the life of the church in its worship, its mission, and its caring ministry.

This ministry of leadership appears also in the list of the gifts of the Spirit in Rom 12, where Paul says that "leaders" should exercise their gift with "diligence" (Rom 12.8; similarly NIV). It is true that in some English versions a somewhat different translation is found: for instance, the RSV translates the phrase, "he who gives aid, with zeal". In fact, the underlying Greek verb can mean both "to lead" and "to care for". However, rather than seek to make distinctions between these two meanings, it is more helpful to note how the two meanings may interrelate: leadership within a church context is not about the exercise of power, but rather is about the exercise of care.

The concept of leadership is also present in Paul's third list of spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4.7-13, where amongst the various 'offices' of ministry is that of the pastor-teacher. Like all the other offices mentioned here, the emphasis is upon the 'enabling' aspect of this ministry - pastor-teachers enable the people of God to fulfil their various ministries. However, the term "pastor" would also have carried clear overtones of leadership, for in the ancient world the word 'pastor' or 'shepherd' was often used as a synonym for a 'leader' or 'king'.

## **A Baptist Perspective**

Baptists have always recognised the need for leadership in the church. As the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 put it:

"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."

Although the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' are not found in earlier Baptist usage, the underlying concept is present in all streams of Baptist life. The various 'offices' of ministry imply leadership.

Not all Baptists are happy with this emphasis on leadership, and some would prefer to interpret the role of ordained ministry primarily with reference to the 'ministry of Word and Sacrament'. The later Particular Baptist Confession of 1677 and the General Baptist 'Orthodox' Confession of 1679 give a positive recognition of the role of the pastor with regard to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, as we shall see when we come to examine the role of the pastor, there is no New Testament basis for such an understanding. Baptists, if they are to be true to the Scriptures, are called to be radical believers!

## **Women in Leadership**

Are all the 'offices' of ministry open to women as well as men? Is it true that 'Leadership is male', as David Pawson, a former Baptist minister, argued; or are leadership gifts given to both men and women?

The Scriptures teach that the Spirit gives his gifts irrespective of gender (Acts 2.17,18). Although certain cultural situations might limit leadership to men (see 1 Cor 11.3-6; 14.33-36; 1 Tim 2.11-15), in principle there is no Scriptural reason why women should not share in the leadership.

In the church in Rome, for instance, women as well as men took the lead: thus Paul mentions that Phoebe was a deacon (Rom 16.1,2), Prisca was a teacher (Rom 16.3), and Junia was even an apostle (see Rom 16.7. Unfortunately the first edition of the NIV spoke of Junias, rather than Junia: however modern commentators are unanimous that a woman and not a man is in view). From Acts 21.9 (see also Acts 2.17,18) we learn that women were also prophets.

There is therefore no reason why women may not share the leadership with men in today's church. The presumed superiority of male over against female no longer exists in Christ (Gal 3.28). To quote from a key Baptist Union document on the place of women in the church:

"For centuries [the church] has been under the bondage of a clouded understanding of the Scriptures, where the glory of the gospel has been restricted through a Judaism framed apart from the revelation and redemption wrought by Christ; and church order as interpreted by male clergy has taken precedence over the kingdom of God and salvation for the world. Man and woman, created for partnership, have been redeemed for partnership in service. It is high time to make that partnership truly effective in the service of God in his church and his world."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> George Beasley-Murray, *Man and Woman in the Church* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, London 1983) 13.

In Christ a new order has come into being. Women can and should expect to play varying roles within Christian leadership.

Baptists, alas, divide over this issue. Although in most Baptist churches women can be - and often are - deacons, in many countries women still cannot be pastors. In the Baptist Union of Great Britain it was in 1922 that the first woman pastor was recognised. The then General Secretary of the Baptist Union, J.H. Shakespeare wrote:

"I regard the liberation of women from the bonds of prejudice... as the most helpful feature of our time. Only at its peril can the Church make itself the last ditch of prejudice in this respect or forget that its problems will best be solved by men and women working together."

Yet in spite of the Baptist Union's recognition of women in pastoral ministry, in comparison with other denominations in England Baptists still have one of the smallest percentages of female ministers: however, that is now changing. A recent survey revealed that while only some 13% of Baptist ministers are women, some 30% of those training for ministry are women. On the other hand in Sweden almost half the Baptist ministers are women!

## **THE MINISTRY OF ELDERS AND DEACONS**

### **Baptist Diversity**

Baptists have expressed their leadership gifts in a variety of ways. John Smyth, for instance, the leader of the first English Baptist church in Amsterdam, in his last confession of faith defined the church as having two sorts of "ministers":

"Christ hath set in his outward church two sorts of ministers: viz. some who are called pastors, teachers, or elders, who administer the word and sacraments, and others, who are called deacons, men and women: whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints' feet".

Although the early Baptists envisaged each church having several elders, increasingly the eldership was identified with a 'one-man-ministry', with the result that most British Baptist churches today have simply a minister (the 'elder') and a board (sometimes quaintly called a 'court') of deacons.

There are, however, plenty of exceptions to this pattern. Some Baptist churches have for many years maintained both elders and deacons in addition to having ministers; more recently other churches, which previously only had a minister and deacons, have reintroduced elders to work alongside their pastors.

Where there are both elders and deacons, then the elders are often seen as having a leadership role in the spiritual and pastoral affairs of the church, while the deacons are seen as responsible for the more practical aspects of the church's life. Whether or not that distinction between the 'spiritual' and the 'practical' can be maintained, is open to question. The task of the church treasurer, for instance, is normally seen as a diaconal responsibility, and yet the

practical business of drawing up of a church budget can call for a high degree of spirituality. Many a pastor has reason to thank God for a godly church treasurer, endowed with the spiritual gift of wisdom.

### **New Testament patterns**

In the New Testament we find both elders and deacons. Paul in 1 Tim 3 lays down the qualities necessary for elders and deacons - unfortunately he says almost next to nothing about their differing duties!

There are those who equate the deacons of 1 Tim 3 with the seven men "full of the Spirit and wisdom" who in Acts 6.1-6 were chosen "to wait (*diakonein*) on tables". Such an equation is highly unlikely. The Seven did not form the kind of management team responsible for such mundane matters of church life as finance and fabric and general administration, which seems to be the role of deacons in churches which have elders and deacons. Rather, they had a key role to play in the pastoral care of the widows of Jerusalem. As Luke develops the story of the church in Acts, it becomes clear that these seven were spiritual leaders of the kind of standing which is normally accorded to elders today: Stephen, for instance, was a creative theologian (see Acts 7), whilst Philip was a gifted evangelist (see Acts 8).

There was no one blueprint for ministry in New Testament times. The church at Jerusalem was structured differently from the church at Corinth, and almost certainly the church at Corinth was structured differently from the churches addressed in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Ultimately what counts are New Testament principles rather than one particular pattern. It is more important for gifts of leadership to be released, than for concern to be expressed over particular terminology. With regard to the latter, the present popularity of the term 'elder' in many Baptist churches is open to question. While it was appropriate in the first century, sociological patterns have changed to such a degree that its usage is anachronistic. For in the first-century world, be it predominantly Greek, Roman, or Jewish, people were either 'young' (i.e. under 40) or 'old' (i.e. over 40) - there was no such thing as middle age. Yet in many Baptist churches today there are plenty of middle-aged men who are dignified with the title 'old man' (i.e. elder) - a strange phenomenon!

## **BAPTIST PRINCIPLES CONCERNING LEADERSHIP**

Amidst all the diverse patterns of leadership within Baptist churches, there are certain things which are common to all.

### **Leadership is shared**

In no Baptist church is the minister or pastor, the only officeholder. There are always others - deacons and/or elders - who together with the minister share the leadership of the church. In this respect Baptists seek to model their life on the New Testament church, where there was always a plurality of leadership (see Acts 13.1; 14.23; 15.23; 20.17,28; Phil 1.1).

[There are, of course, churches which have no minister - either because the church is

undergoing a pastoral vacancy, or because it is too small to employ a minister or does not have a lay pastor. However, the same point applies: leadership is then shared by the deacons and/or elders].

Traditionally, in a British setting at least, the minister's right-hand person has been the church secretary, who amongst other things represents the interests of the minister to the church and the interests of the church to the minister. However, in some churches some of the traditional functions of the church secretary have been taken over by the elders, while in others some of the tasks are designated to a 'church administrator'. As a result in some churches the secretary is now called the senior deacon. The precise way in which leadership is shared is unimportant: certainly Scripture is no guide in terms of detail. What is important is that there is shared leadership. Baptists do not conceive the task of ministers as 'running' the church on their own.

### **Leadership is Appointed by the Church**

Following their understanding of the church meeting, Baptists give the church the task of appointing elders and deacons. In most British Baptist churches deacons are elected at a church meeting by secret ballot to serve for a period of three years, normally with an option to serve a further term of service. In some churches there is a limit to the number of times a deacon may serve consecutively and deacons have to stand down for a year after, say, two terms of service.

The practice relating to the appointment of elders varies, in that a fixed time limit is not always given. Whether there be a time limit or not, the important point is that elders are appointed by the church and not - as is often the case in other church traditions - by the 'leadership'.

### **Leadership is Accountable to the Church**

In a Baptist church elders and/or deacons - as also ministers - may never be a law to themselves. Although the service ('ministry') of elders and deacons is to lead, they are always ultimately accountable to the church meeting, which - under Christ, through his Word and by the Spirit - always has the primacy.

## **THE MINISTRY OF PASTORS**

Within the context of every-member-ministry, and alongside the ministry of deacons and elders, Baptists have also affirmed the ministry of 'pastors' or 'ministers'. The specific task of the pastor or minister is to spearhead the work of the church's mission and ministry, and thereby act as the leader of the leaders. How precisely do ministers or pastors express their leadership in the life of a local church?

### **Teacher**

Paul in Eph 4.11 speaks of the Risen Christ having given to the church "some to be pastors and teachers". The construction of the underlying Greek makes it clear that this is one and the same office: i.e. a chief duty of any pastor is to teach - the flock must be fed. For Baptists this

task of preaching and teaching - "the ministry of the word" (see Acts 6.4: also 1 Tim 3.2; 5.17) - has always been paramount.

### **Carer**

Along with the teaching role goes the caring role. The very metaphor 'pastor' (derived from the Latin word meaning "shepherd") suggests the tending of the flock. Rightly understood, pastoral care involves not just helping the hurting, but also encouraging people to grow and develop in the Christian faith. This is the 'episcopal' function of 'oversight' (see Acts 20.28: also 1 Pet 5.2), which may be shared, but never finally delegated.

### **Enabler**

A further role is indicated by Paul in Eph 4.11,12: pastor-teachers are to "equip the saints for the work of ministry". Far from monopolising ministry, the pastor is called to multiply ministry. Baptists along with others have increasingly stressed this 'enabling' aspect of pastoral ministry. John Nicholson in a booklet issued by the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1976, claimed that "perhaps the term 'enabler' best describes the role of the minister today". Although this is an overstatement, it is a valid expression of the calling of every Baptist to be a minister.

So far we have sought to define pastoral ministry with the church primarily in view. However, no Baptist pastors worthy of their salt will be unconcerned for the world for whom Christ died (see 2 Tim 4.5). The pastoral task includes the mobilising of God's people in mission, whether that be evangelism or social action.

Pastoral leadership, then, includes the preaching and teaching of God's Word, the oversight and equipping of God's people, with a view to advancing the Kingdom of God in word and deed. None of these tasks of teaching, pastoral care, evangelism, and enabling, are exclusive to those engaged in pastoral ministry. Indeed, in any local church it would be exceedingly limiting if pastoral care and evangelism were to be the exclusive preserve of the minister - if a church is to grow and develop, such tasks need to be shared. However, as the overall leader of a church the pastor is responsible for ensuring that these tasks are responsibly delegated.

### **Ordination**

The distinctive nature of pastoral ministry is recognised in the service of ordination, and the enrolment of the ordained on the denomination's 'register of nationally accredited ministry'. In contrast to the locally-recognised ministry of elders and deacons, ordination accords the formal recognition and trust of the wider church to the ordained. This marks the culmination of a lengthy period of testing and training, and is the occasion when churches together publicly recognise certain individuals as called of God to exercise leadership among them. Through the laying on of hands and prayer, the churches ask that God will fill afresh with his Spirit those who embark upon this new stage of their Christian service (see Acts 6.1-11; 13.1-3; 1 Tim 4.14).

Although in a British Baptist context a service of ordination normally takes place in a local church, Baptists have never regarded ordination as just an act of the local church. Precisely because ordination involves national recognition, representatives of the local association as

also of the Baptist Union are present.

Some Baptists are keen to give even greater significance to ordination, and accept the Reformed understanding of ordination as a setting aside of a person to ‘the ministry of word and sacrament’. However, there are no Biblical grounds for this ‘priestly’ emphasis. Although the ‘ministry of the Word’ is a vital part of a minister’s calling, there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that this is an exclusive calling. Likewise, although in most churches the minister will normally share in the baptising and preside at the Lord's Table, there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that either ordinance is the minister's exclusive preserve. Where the minister baptises or presides at the Lord's Table, the minister does so, not in virtue of being a priest mediating between God and his people, but in virtue of being the recognised and trusted leader of God's flock. Baptists on the whole accept that there is no Scriptural reason why anyone may not perform either function provided it is at the invitation of the church.

A corollary of this ‘priestly’ emphasis is that ‘once a minister always a minister’. Baptists, however, have always believed that a calling to a specific task was essential to ministry. For this reason, ordination is always dependent upon a church specifically calling the individual concerned. In the mid-twentieth century there was much discussion amongst Baptists as to whether a person no longer in pastoral ministry could be regarded as a ‘minister’. However, the fact is that there is ministry beyond the local church: ministers, for instance, can serve as chaplains or college tutors. Likewise most retired ministers, although no longer pastors, believe that God has still a call upon their life.

## **SPECIALIST MINISTRIES**

A number of specialist ministries have developed within Baptist churches.

### **Youth Specialists**

Many churches employ youth specialists, who are often known as youth workers or youth ministers. Some youth specialists are accredited ministers of the Baptist Union. In the words of Baptist Union paper, *Called to Be a Youth Specialist*:

“The task of the Youth Specialist is to enable young people to develop personal faith so that they can grow in their relationship with God.

The Youth Specialist works with young people at a time when they are experiencing intense emotional feelings, dramatic physical changes and social and peer pressures. The Youth Specialist will be someone with a strong Christian faith, motivated by a sense of call, guided by mature and discerning wisdom, encouraged and supported by the local church (Luke 2.52; Heb 4.11-16)”

At present accredited youth specialists are still the exception rather than the rule, because the Baptist Union demands that they have vocational and theological qualifications. New courses have been devised to ensure that those called by God to this challenging area of ministry will be able to meet the rigorous standards rightly demanded by the Baptist Union

## **Evangelists**

Another welcome development has been the growth of evangelists working within and among Baptist churches. In the words of the Baptist Union paper, *Called to be an evangelist*

“Evangelists are those whose gift and calling is to make Christ known on the frontiers between church and society (Acts 21.8; Eph 4.11 and 2 Tim 4.5).

The term ‘evangelist’ is used as an inclusive term to avoid stereotyping the work of evangelism. Used in this way it includes not only preachers, personal evangelists, apologists and musical evangelists, but also church planters, whose gift and calling is to pioneer new congregations”.

In the past many Baptists have been evangelists, but they have tended to exercise their ministry on behalf of para-church organisations as distinct from on behalf of Baptist churches. It has been an encouraging change to see the Baptist Union formally owning the ministry of evangelism.

## **THE MINISTRY OF REGIONAL MINISTERS**

### **Apostles**

From the beginning of the church's life there were those who had a wider ministry which went beyond that of the local church. Paul in his list of ministries in Eph 4.11 wrote that the Risen Christ "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers". Pastors and teachers, were usually locally based, whereas apostles, prophets and evangelists seem to have exercised a ‘trans-local ministry’ (see Eph 2.20; 3.5; also Rev 22.9).

With regard to the apostles, it is clear from the way in which the New Testament uses the term ‘apostles’ that it refers not just to the Twelve, that unrepeatable and unique group who were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus" (Acts 1.21,22), but to a broader group of men and women who were given a roving commission in the life of the church. Thus the term ‘apostle’ is used of James (1 Cor 15.7), Barnabas (Acts 14.4,14; 1 Cor 9.5-6), Silas (1 Thess 2.7), Timothy (1 Thess 2.6-7), Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16.7). The word ‘apostle’ literally means ‘one who is sent’: these ‘apostles’ were sent out from a church or group of churches with an evangelistic and overseeing function which went beyond the local church.

### **Messengers**

This ‘apostolic’ role was revived by Baptists in the seventeenth century when they created the office of ‘Messenger’ (a term so similar to that of ‘apostle’ that some modern versions of the Bible use it as a synonym for ‘apostle’). These Messengers had a specific ministry beyond the local church. They had responsibility for evangelism and church planting, as also for caring for the newly formed churches. They were also sometimes called in to give advice and counsel to one or more of the churches who had originally appointed them.

In the course of time the office of ‘Messenger’ died out in Baptist churches. But in 1916 the

Baptist Union of Great Britain created General Superintendents whose task was to care for the pastors and churches in their 'Areas'. In some respects this new office was seen as a return to the office of 'Messenger'. At the beginning of this century the 'Superintendents' ceased to be and in their place are the present 'regional ministers'

### **Baptist Bishops?**

In this ecumenical age there are those who wish to liken regional ministers to bishops. There are similarities in role. Regional ministers, for instance, have the 'care' of the churches (see 2 Cor 11.28) as part of their brief. But there are distinct differences caused by the Baptist understanding of the local church as having "liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His [Jesus Christ's] laws". Ultimate 'oversight' (the English translation of the Greek word *episkope* from which the word 'episcopacy' is derived) of any local church belongs to the local church as it gathers in church meeting. It is not without significance that in the New Testament the term *episkope* ('oversight': see 1 Tim 3.1) and its cognate forms *episkopos* (bishop or 'overseer': see Acts 20.28, Phil 1.1; 1 Tim 3.2; Titus 1.7) and *episkopeo* (to watch over: see Heb 12.5 and 1 Pet 5.2) are used exclusively in connection with the local church.

The most important reason for avoiding talking of regional ministers as Baptist 'bishops' is found in the unhelpful associations connected with the Anglican and Roman Catholic doctrine of the 'historic episcopate'. The 'historic episcopate' has been defined by the Church of England as "not merely a method of Church government (in which sense it would hardly be called historic"), but "a distinct, substantive and historic transmission of the commission of the apostles in and by which our Lord formed his disciples into a distinctly organised body or Church". Bishops stand in 'apostolic succession' and are held to be of the 'essence' of the church. They not only safeguard the faith of the church, but represent the continuity and unity of the church. Without episcopal ordination, any form of ordained ministry is 'invalid' and has no authority within it.

This understanding of episcopacy is a direct denial of the Baptist understanding of the church. The church is the people of God and cannot be summed up in particular individuals. When, for instance, a Baptist pastor or regional minister is called to represent the local or wider church, they do so always on behalf of the local or wider church and not because as a result of the laying-on-of-hands they in themselves now provide a focus of the church's unity.

Furthermore, not only is this doctrine of apostolic succession untenable on historical grounds - there has not been an unbroken succession of bishops - it is also not Scriptural. If the doctrine of apostolic succession is to be found in Scripture at all, then it relates to the faithful transmission of the Word (2 Tim 2.2) rather than to who lays hands on whom.

Because of all these associations, realism dictates that, within a British context at least, the word 'bishop' can never become a purely functional term. There is no case for Baptists using the term 'bishop' of their regional ministers. If there were a case at all for Baptists reviving the New Testament office of 'bishop', then should be applied to the office of 'pastor' - for in the New Testament the office of 'bishop' belonged to local rather than trans-local ministry.

## **The Authority of Regional Ministers**

Precisely because it is in the church meeting that ultimate authority under Christ is to be found, the authority of regional ministers in their dealings with local churches, is no more than moral and persuasive. Regional ministers cannot force their judgements on a church. The words of a former Baptist college principal, originally directed to ‘superintendents’, are of equal relevance to regional ministers: “They are encouragers and advisers” (H. Wheeler Robinson). Similarly in their dealings with other denominations, regional ministers may represent the Baptist Union, but cannot commit Baptist churches to any particular policy.

However, as with all Christian leaders, regional ministers are entitled to receive the “affection, honour and support in the Lord” (*Patterns & Prayers for Christian Worship*) of all those whom they serve. Many a minister and many a church have had good reason to be grateful to God for the wise counsel of a regional minister.

## **Other Translocal Ministries**

In addition to regional ministers, Baptists have developed a wide range of other ‘translocal’ ministries. Into this category come Baptist Union officials, college principals and tutors. Although there may be no strict New Testament precedent for their respective offices, the principle at least is found in the ‘translocal’ ministry of the apostles, prophets and evangelists.

## **SUMMARY**

Baptists delight in the many and varied gifts of the Spirit that God has given all his people for ‘ministry’. They happily acknowledge that amidst this diversity there is a variety of roles. They have encouraged the development of ‘professional’ pastoral ministry as also of other specialised forms of Christian ministry. They reject, however, any false division between ‘clergy’ and ‘laity’. They believe passionately that all God's people are called to Christian ministry - for them the ‘priesthood of all believers’ is foundational. Here again we discover that Baptists are radical believers.

## **9. SHARING THE FAITH**

### **Baptists engage in mission**

#### **BAPTISTS ARE A MISSIONARY PEOPLE**

##### **Every Baptist a missionary**

Johann Gerhardt Oncken, the great pioneer of Baptist work on the European Continent, coined the slogan, 'Every Baptist a missionary'. Although Baptists have not always lived up to their missionary calling, as a generalisation it would be true to say that Baptists have been characterised by a passion for the Gospel. Their rite of believers' baptism emphasises the necessity of conversion. Long before the term 'missionary congregations' became prevalent, many Baptist churches were already living out the life of a missionary congregation.

It is no accident that William Carey, the pioneer of the modern missionary movement, and Billy Graham, the world's most well-known evangelist, were Baptists. They are simply the tip of an iceberg. Thus the Baptist historian, W.T. Whitley, noted that way back in 1644 of the fifteen men who signed the Particular Baptist Confession "every one who can be traced was an ardent evangelist". John Bunyan was converted in as a result of a group of Baptist washerwomen gossiping the Gospel. Evangelism is part of the Baptist way of life.

It is significant that in the relatively brief 'declaration of principle' adopted by the Baptist Union of Great Britain as its basis of union, the third and final principle declares:

"It is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world".

##### **The challenge of a declining church**

Although Baptists have had a passion for the Gospel, British Baptists – along with other Christian churches too – face the challenge of a declining church. According to Peter Brierley, the UK's leading church statistician,

- The global church would be shrinking if it were for Africa
- The European church wobbles from a past faith to an amorphous spirituality
- Some claim that the UK church is simply 'asleep' (rather than 'dead' or 'dying') but the sad truth is that though good, real growth can be seen in many places, the loss from the major institutional churches outweighs all the gains
- The age of churchgoers is a huge worry: in the UK 24% of churchgoers were 65 or over in 2000; 36% will be in 2020; 45% in 2030. <sup>8</sup>

According to a 2019 survey by the UK's National Centre of Research

- 26% of Brits say that they do not believe in God
- 18% are agnostic
- only 19% are absolutely certain of God's existence.

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Brierley, *Does the Future Have a Church? Major Global and UK Trends 2020-2030* (ADBC Publishing, Tonbridge, Kent 2019)

Churches in Britain are finding it more and more difficult to engage in effective evangelism, with the result that fewer and fewer people are becoming Christians. In spite of their passion for evangelism, Baptists continue to experience steady decline. The statistics collected by the Baptist Union of Great Britain for the last twenty years year do not make for happy reading:

<i>The year ending</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2000</i>
• Churches:	1955	2122
• Members:	112,925	142,636
• Children:	67,292	105,749
• Young People:	26,293	35,594
• Baptisms:	2,725	4,049

When one contrasts the membership figures in 2019 with the average attendance of 120,461 at the main weekly service of worship, church attendance is slightly higher than the membership of 112,925. However, the attendance figures relate to everybody present, including children and other non-members too. While it is true that many people only attend church every other Sunday, nonetheless it would appear that there is not a great disparity between the number of attenders and the number of members.

Some years ago Robin Gill, a theologian and a sociologist, likened British churches to "the pelicans in St James' Park" in central London, "awkward, out of place, angular, with a big mouth but little brain, demanding but inactive". He went on: "Churches in Britain need to make urgent choices about structure and direction. If they are to cease being pelicans, they need to be much clearer about how they might be effective in present-day Britain. They need to be more single-minded about growth... about how they might reach the nine out of ten people in Britain who seldom or never go to church". In the last few years the challenge has become even greater!

So, what can be done? How can Baptists engage in effective evangelism?

### **1. Be open to change**

Churches must be prepared to change. Yet change is costly. In the words Leith Anderson, an American pastor:

"There is a basic principle of church growth: 'For a church to grow, it must want to grow and be willing to pay the price'. The price is least counted in dollars. It comes in the more costly currency of change. It is doing church in new ways, incorporating new people, moving out of comfort zones, and existing for others rather than for self."

Change is never an option in life. We either change or we die. The seven last words of a church were: "We never did it that way before".

### **2. Adopt a variety of strategies**

There is no one way to win people to Jesus Christ and his church. Our mantra should be that of Paul: "By all means save some" (1 Cor 9.22). In today's 'supermarket' of beliefs, a variety of approaches are necessary, for people are at various distances from the Christian faith. There are the near fringe, the middle-distance fringe, the far fringe,

the ‘neo-pagans’, followers of other mainline religions, and the truly ‘secularised’. A different strategy is needed for each group.

### **3. Build bridges between the church and the local community**

There need to be activities which build bridges of friendship with people outside the church, so that non-Christians can discover that Christians are normal fun-loving people, not peculiar, sad people; and most importantly, people who are interested in others, people who know how to make friends. Such activities can vary enormous, from quiz evenings to Valentine dinners, from ‘exam revision’ clubs for young people to fashion shows for younger women. Creativity is the name of the game!

### **4. Make the most of Christian festivals.**

Christmas is a great opportunity to invite people to church. Many non-church people are open to accepting an invitation to a carol service. But a carol service in itself is not enough: to be evangelistically effective it must contain an accessible Christmas message. I love the King’s College Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols: its a marvelous aesthetic experience, but it is not an exercise in evangelism.

Easter is another special opportunity for presenting the Christian hope of life beyond the grave. So too is All Saints Day (celebrated on the Sunday nearest to 1 November) when churches can invite those who have lost a loved one in the past year to come and give thanks for them.

### **5. Rebrand ‘dedication’ services**

There is a lot to be said for ‘rebranding’ the ‘dedication’ service by calling it a ‘naming ceremony’ and then ‘marketing’ it among the parents who attend toddler groups. The fact is that many people are overcome by a sense of awe at the creation of new life and want to express their thanks to God. A ‘naming’ ceremony provides the opportunity to publicly name a child and to pray for family life. Within such a service there can also be an opportunity for elements of the old ‘dedication’ service such as ‘thanksgiving’ and ‘blessing’ and ‘dedication’. However, whereas dedication services in Baptist churches tend to be primarily for church families, a naming ceremony could appeal to many who do not normally attend church.

### **6. Make baptismal services more outward looking**

Baptismal services can be great evangelistic opportunities for Baptists, but these opportunities are not always grasped. In some churches the primary focus is on those being baptised, where the emphasis is on the call to discipleship rather than the call to repentance and faith. In other churches, while the preaching may be ‘Gospel-centred’, but the congregation is primarily made up of church people. Baptismal candidates need to be encouraged to invite not just family members and close friends, but also neighbours, colleagues, fellow students and teachers. If a church is baptising four candidates, there is no reason why the preacher cannot be provided with a hundred or more happy pagans to preach to!

### **7. Create ‘accessible’ services**

Here I don’t have in mind the ‘seeker services’ popularised some years ago by Bill Hybels of Willowcreek, which kicked hymns and prayers into touch and became essentially ‘presentation’ services. Rather, ‘accessible’ services contain well-known

hymns and prayers chosen or written with non-Christians. Modern songs can be included, but care needs to be taken in their selection, for much contemporary worship can be even more inaccessible than traditional worship. Baptists need to ensure that the church's worship style does not become a barrier to the Gospel.

### **8. Engage in process evangelism**

Years ago the classic way in which many became Christians was by attending an evangelistic event and responding to an appeal to come forward at the end of the sermon. Faith for them involved very much a crisis in their lives. However, the last major successful evangelistic event of this kind held in Britain was the Billy Graham Mission England crusade held in 1984. After that, things changed. People no longer responded to Billy Graham – or to any other evangelist – in the way they used to, for as a country we had changed. At one stage there were many lapsed Christians on the fringes of the church, today there is widespread ignorance about the Christian faith. There is no longer a harvest which evangelists can reap on a one-night stand.

Evangelism has had to change. People now need an opportunity to reflect on the Christian Gospel before they commit themselves to Jesus. The journey to faith takes longer and longer. Instead of 'crisis' evangelism, 'process' evangelism is required. Hence the popularity of Alpha courses. Yet increasingly a ten-week course is often too short for people to make a commitment. But then, if the ordinary physical birth process takes nine months, we should not be surprised if the spiritual birth process takes a number of months too.

### **9. Identify responsive people groups**

Baptist churches would do well to focus on groups that may be more responsive to the Gospel than other groups. For instance, pregnant women and young mothers are often open to exploring the meaning and purpose of life. For many the birth-process is a crisis period in life, when they are jolted out of the rut of their previous way of thinking and are open to hearing the gospel. If churches wish to be strategic, they need to train their young mothers to share the Gospel with their peers.

Another responsive people group are older people, in part because post-retirement years are often increasingly lonely years, and in part because these post-retirement years cause people to reflect on their mortality. Death is no longer a remote possibility, but an increasing reality. Here is another 'window of opportunity' for effective evangelism.

### **10. Build relationships**

The key to evangelism lies not in programmes or strategies. Relationships are the key-factor in people finding faith in Christ. A survey of over 500 newly baptised believers revealed that over three-quarters of the candidates selected Christian friends as being the factor which had influenced them most in their journey into faith. Unfortunately, many churches are so busy that their members do not have sufficient time to develop relationships with their neighbours and colleagues at work. The hustle and bustle of life in an average Baptist church is reflected not too unfairly in the little ditty:

Mary had a little lamb,  
She also had a sheep.

And then they joined the Baptist church  
And died through lack of sleep.

Creating an effective evangelism strategy will involve churches cutting down on their church activities!

## **MISSION INCLUDES EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL ACTION**

Traditionally Baptists have highlighted the Great Commission of Matt 28.18-20 as their basis for mission. There the risen Lord Jesus declares:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

### **Lausanne 1974**

Sometimes Baptist have interpreted the Great Commission in terms of a rather narrow evangelism, but toward the latter half of the twentieth century a more holistic understanding of mission emerged, twinning social action with evangelism. The primary impetus for this re-evaluation of mission was the International Congress on World Evangelisation held at Lausanne in 1974, out of which came the Lausanne Covenant, which affirmed that "evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty". True, "in the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary", but such evangelism, it was recognised, must take place in the context of a "deep and costly penetration of the world".

In one sense there was nothing new about this insight. There have always been Baptists who have held a concept of mission broad enough to encompass both evangelism and social action. For instance, in the nineteenth century C.H. Spurgeon, alongside his vigorous evangelism and church planting activities founded an orphanage for children and to his cost protested against the American slave trade. However, in reaction to a 'liberal protestantism', which at the beginning of the twentieth century had sometimes expressed itself in an anaemic social gospel, some Baptists over-reacted and turned their backs on the social implications of the Gospel. The Lausanne Congress helped evangelical Christians to recover their heritage.

### **Grand Rapids 1982**

In a follow-up conference at Grand Rapids, the Lausanne Continuing Committee issued a report, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility*, which distinguished between social service and social action:

Social service	Social action
Relieving human need	Removing the causes of human need
Philanthropic activity	Political and economic activity
Ministering to individuals/families	Seeking to transform the structures of society
Works of mercy	The quest for justice

The Grand Rapids report raised the question: "Does social action belong to the church as a church, or is it the prerogative of individual believers who make up the church, and of groups?". Baptists, like the authors of the report, are divided in their answers to this question.

### **The Nazareth Manifesto**

With the claims of social action in mind, attention is now often drawn to the 'Nazareth manifesto' of Luke 4.18,19 as, in part at least, a description of the church's mission:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour".

It has been argued, particularly by those involved in urban mission, that this 'Nazareth manifesto' is to be combined with the "Resurrection mandate" of Matthew 28. Thus Colin Marchant, a former President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and for many years committed to mission in East London, declared:

"Too often it has been an 'either... or'; either social justice or personal conversion. The great need has been to hold both together. The two streams will then flow into the key model of 1 Corinthians 12 - the Body of Christ uniting believers in a total ministry of directed love towards the world in its anguish and need."

This emphasis on a broader understanding of mission is a reflection of our calling to be both light and salt in the world (Matt 5.13-16). In the darkness of this world we are to point to Jesus, the light of the world; we are to let his light shine through us. Also, where the world is rotting and decaying, we are to hold putrefaction at bay by getting involved in the world's structures, actively pursuing peace and justice in our society.

## **MOBILISING THE CHURCH FOR SOCIAL ACTION**

Every Baptist church should devise its own strategy for social action appropriate to its own community. Such a strategy might include the following elements:

### **Corporate Prayer**

In the church's prayers of intercession there are constant opportunities to include world, national, and community concerns. Maybe a special 'ministry team' might be set up to ensure that a wide range of concerns are regularly brought to the attention of the church.

### **Support for Professionals**

Many churches will have a sprinkling of people professionally involved in community service: e.g. social workers, teachers, police officers, prison officers, health visitors, doctors, nurses. Many of these are at the 'sharp end' of life, and may encounter suspicion and misunderstanding, if not hostility, in the course of their work. Such people can benefit from the prayerful support of their local churches.

## **Encouragement for Volunteers**

There are many areas of voluntary service in which Christians can and should be involved: e.g. the magistracy, school-governing boards, parent-teacher associations, health consultative councils, victim support groups, trade unions. It is not enough to leave such involvement to individual initiative. A wise church will encourage suitably gifted people in community service - even if it means less time for formal church activities.

## **Involvement in political processes**

Although no church may align itself with one political party, it is important that Christians are involved in politics - both at local and national level. Churches need to encourage members to belong to political parties of varying hue, and in this way act as salt in the world. A 'bonus' is when members are elected to Borough or County Councils - or even to Parliament!

## **Local Community Projects**

A church not only needs to serve its community through the involvement of its individual members, it also needs to be seen as a church that cares. Projects need to be found which offer both an avenue of Christian service for members, and an opportunity for the church to demonstrate in a practical and concrete way the love of God in Christ. The opportunities for such projects are many and various: it might involve hosting a child contact centre for 'broken' families referred by the courts; or it might involve running a club for people with mental health problems referred by social services; yet another project might be opening a lunch club for older people or an after-school centre where children might come and do their homework. Other projects might include a community debt advice centre, courses for people for whom English is a second language, breakfast clubs for children, day-care for children, supporting a centre for homeless people, counselling services..... There are so many ways in which the love of God may be expressed.

## **BAPTISTS AND OVERSEAS MISSION**

### **An Irrepressible Enthusiast**

At a Baptist ministers' meeting in 1785 William Carey raised the question "whether the command given to the Apostles to teach all nations was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent"

A senior minister, John Collet Ryland, told him to sit down: "You're an enthusiast. When God is pleased to convert the heathen, He'll do it without consulting you and me". But Carey refused to give up. In 1792 he brought out a book of 87 pages entitled, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use means for the conversion of the heathens, in which the religious state of the different nations of the world, the success of former undertakings, and the practicability of further undertakings, are considered*. Carey in his carefully researched work argued for the formation of a missionary society, founded along the lines of a trading company. In 1792, after preaching his 'deathless' sermon at Nottingham, with its great watchword, "Expect great things from God, Attempt great things for God", his fellow

Baptists were galvanised into action and in November 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society came into being with a capital of £13 2s 6d. From that action the beginnings of the modern missionary movement are traced.

### **The Continuing Story**

Over the years the missionary enterprise has changed out of all recognition. The pioneering days of pith helmets and native porters are long gone. However, through legal work to surgery, food projects to education, BMS World Mission (as the Baptist Missionary Society now likes to be known) continues strive every day to make Jesus known and share the full life he offers. In the words of a recent strapline: “We’re an evangelical mission agency transforming the lives of people in fragile states and under-evangelised communities, among the world’s most marginalised people, on four continents”.

## **SUMMARY**

Although mission is not restricted to Baptists, Baptists are unashamedly a missionary people. They have always been passionately concerned to share their faith and to demonstrate God’s love for all. It is no exaggeration to say that the Great Commission is engraved on Baptist hearts. As radical believers they take seriously the charge of the risen Lord.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

### **A heritage to own**

The title of this book and the thesis of its chapters is that the Baptist way of being the church produces radical believers. As a direct result of seeking to root their life together in the Scriptures, Baptist churches have a radical edge in comparison with the more established churches.

On the other hand, honesty compels us to admit that the reality of present-day Baptist life does not always correspond with the radicalism of those convictions traditionally held by Baptists. In spite of their dissenting tradition, Baptists can be as conformist as any other Christian church or denomination.

Hopefully this presentation of the principles undergirding the Baptist way of being the church will cause Baptists to re-think the way they express their life together. How true are we to our heritage? How true are we to the Scriptures upon which our heritage is based? The Reformation cry – ‘reformed and being reformed’ – needs to be on our lips too. There is never a time when we can afford to sit back on our laurels, thinking we have ‘made it’. A sense of holy discontent should be the hallmark of every Baptist church, as it constantly seeks to be true to its calling. No church can stand still – ongoing renewal is here to stay.

I wish therefore to challenge churches and their leaders to take a fresh look at the way in which they live their life together. Maybe what is called for is not so much a mission audit, but a heritage audit.

Yet this book has not been written just to challenge churches to review their life together. Another intention has been to spell out that distinct identity which is peculiar to Baptists. True, Baptists have much in common with other Christians. True, all the various Baptist emphases are held by one or other Christian church. But nowhere else are all these emphases found held together, save in Baptist churches. What is more, all these emphases are rooted in Scripture, and as such are worth standing for. Baptist can – and should – be rightly proud of their heritage, because it is a heritage which has always sought to express God’s way of being the church. True Baptists, therefore, are not simply Baptists by convenience or by accident, but rather by conviction. Let this book be a challenge to all Baptists to own their heritage.