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A FADED HERITAGE

English Baptist political thinking in the 1930s

The 1930s were critical years for the English Nonconformist churches. The decade brought to a head many of the issues and fears which had been developing over the previous forty years; not least is this seen in the field of political allegiances and ambitions. This article will focus on just one of the major Nonconformist denominations of this period, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

David Bebbington, in his seminal paper, 'Baptists and Politics since 1914',¹ has demonstrated that, whilst at the end of the last century a Baptist was, almost by definition, a Liberal², matters had changed radically by the 1920s. This changing allegiance was reflected in the editorial stance of the denominational organ, the *Baptist Times*, which, under the editorship of J. C. Carlile, moved away from the decidedly pro-Liberal position of his predecessor, J. H. Shakespeare, support long-courted by Lloyd George. Bebbington suggests that the watershed is to be found in 1924, in which year the paper declared itself content with a Conservative government if that should mean excluding Labour.³

In discussing the reason for this long-term erosion of Baptist identification with Liberalism, the fundamental explanation is to be found in the decay of communal politics.⁴ Bebbington argues that this decay was four-fold: traditional Nonconformist grievances had been all but eradicated, the social cohesion of chapel life was weakening, social ties were changing as communal politics gave way to class politics, and finally, Liberalism in this period between the wars proved strangely self-destructive.⁵ In short, it had lost its distinctive appeal to Nonconformists.

Indeed, Branson argues that by the general election of December 1923 the only issue on which Tories and Liberals were clearly divided was that of protectionism.⁶ As a gradualist, MacDonald was at odds with radical socialism such as that manifested in Poplarism, the working-class movement centred on the radical socialist and Anglican Christian, George Lansbury. Instead, he favoured centrist policies as early as his 1924 period in office.⁷ Additionally, some Nonconformists moved to the Conservative precisely because they associated the defeat of Germany with the lead given by the Conservatives in the wartime alliance. To this lack of consensus in Baptist voting patterns can be added theological factors which were increasingly influential. The overall teaching under the banner of the Keswick Convention, the appeal of premillennialism and the apparent theological infallibility of the Scofield Reference Bible encouraged many Baptists to adopt an apolitical stance.

The Thirties opened, then, with a sense of political disillusionment pervading the Baptist denomination. This was to deepen as the decade progressed. Lloyd George's star remained in the ascendant; he was still held in great awe by many Baptists, and in its 1930 New Year review his speeches of 1929 were strongly

commended by the *Baptist Times*.⁸ A recent speech on the subject of Empire Free Trade⁹ was described as brilliant, 'sparkling with wit and epigram'. He was still popularly perceived as a defender of the masses against price increases.¹⁰ His 'wonderful career' of forty years in parliament was happily commented upon in the *Baptist Times*.¹¹ Some, perhaps many, Baptists longed for a revival of Liberal fortunes under Lloyd George.¹² Indeed, in the light of unemployment relief costing an estimated £200 a minute, a surmised Liberal/Labour coalition under the joint leadership of Lloyd George and MacDonald was discussed in the 4 September issue of the *Baptist Times*.¹³ Here was a nostalgic longing for the certitudes and clear moral stance of the days of the Nonconformist Conscience.

However, before the year's end, clear notes of criticism of Lloyd George were emerging. In September 1930 he appealed for electoral reform, to which the *Baptist Times* retorted: 'He did not complain when the luck of the game went in his favour'.¹⁴ Again, in December 1930, having denounced Lloyd George's tactics in Parliament, the *Baptist Times* asked why he maintained in office a government of which he was so apparently critical.¹⁵ On the wider Liberal front, concern was expressed at the rifts in the party¹⁶ and what was perceived to be its failed radicalism.¹⁷ Lord Grey, one-time Liberal MP and now Chancellor of Oxford University, was almost routinely criticized.¹⁸ Not infrequently the question of whether the Liberal Party even had a future was posed.¹⁹

Despite this criticism of the Liberal institution, the denomination's spokesmen held to a position strongly in favour of Empire Free Trade.²⁰ Baldwin was criticized for his protectionism,²¹ a *Baptist Times* writer concluding: 'If he goes to the country on that programme, he will be courting the same disaster as overwhelmed him in 1923'. However, it is significant that the fierce tone of criticism had mellowed by October of that year,²² the need for public economies being stressed quite firmly.²³ The year ended on a note of political despair: 'While all three parties are scoring dialectical triumphs in Parliament, the position gets continually worse . . . And Nero fiddles while Rome is burning.'²⁴

Although such worthies as J.H. Shakespeare had publicly moved to a pragmatic acceptance of Conservatism as early as 1924, at a more popular level 1931 proved to be a crucial period of political realignment for Baptists. Lloyd George was still the hero of many 'ordinary' Baptists,²⁵ but was called to account on a number of occasions by writers in the *Baptist Times*. In April a feature predicted that the Liberal (or rather, Lloyd George) insistence on re-employment through government financing would speed the inevitable collapse of the finely balanced working relationship between the Labour and Liberal parliamentary parties. The tension within the Liberal Party was clearly understood to precede that between the Liberal and Labour parties.

Throughout this period Baptists retained some political favourites, usually on the basis of a shared religious inclination. Ernest Brown, a member of Bloomsbury Baptist Church from 1930 onwards and at this time still a Liberal, remained

immensely popular with the majority of Baptists;²⁶ as did Labour's George Lansbury, the *Baptist Times* frequently carrying articles written by him.²⁷

In any analysis of the early part of the 1930s attention must be drawn to the debate on the increasingly serious unemployment situation. The *Baptist Times* was becoming less forward in making broad political statements about the economy and the world recession, although it was still tempted to do so on occasions, as with its acceptance of the League of Nations' analysis of the causes of unemployment.²⁸ It was, in fact, shifting its emphasis to considering ways in which the social problems attendant upon unemployment might be ameliorated. Publicly this trend began with a feature (5 March 1931) written by the General Secretary of the Baptist Union, M. E. Aubrey, under the title 'God Bless our Native Land'. Here he argued that: 'It may yet take many of us time to realize that the danger is real, and that, after an era of extravagance, a return to plainer living, simpler pleasures, hard work and unselfish service is the only way out.'²⁹ This call for 'unselfish service' can be seen as a key declaration. It was soon echoed in local Baptist churches.³⁰ In the same copy of the *Baptist Times* the abuses of the Unemployment Relief Scheme were bemoaned,³¹ the writer calling for a much tighter line to be enforced. This writer appeared to be delighted with the 10% decrease in adult unemployment benefit introduced by MacDonald in September 1931.³² Equally, Aubrey wrote firmly against the Labour scheme to nationalize banks. He considered this to be playing with fire and 'wholly mischievous'.³³

It is highly significant that after the September 1931 general election, the *Baptist Times* made fewer and fewer references to political issues, and the comments which were made tended to be on peripheral topics. On several occasions when international trade was discussed the *Baptist Times* alluded to Cabinet divisions over the Free Trade debate.³⁴ In these articles it generally failed to argue its traditional Free Trade position. It ended with an endorsement of the Chancellor's plea: 'The qualities demanded of us are hard work, strict economy, stern courage, and unflinching patience'.³⁵ Confirming this view of politicians, Alfred Ellis, in his Baptist Union Assembly presidential address of 1932, presented the notion that '... there is much more wholesomeness in public life today than the contemporary record would lead us to believe'.³⁶ The Baptist leadership can thus be seen to have come to the point of supporting the Conservative-dominated National Government.

Also from about this time the *Baptist Times* increased its attacks on Lloyd George, with especial concern being expressed at his insistence on the need for re-employment. It considered that this would destroy the National Government. In the editor's view, amongst the wider Baptist constituency individual Labour politicians remained popular, but a dangerously romanticized view of the Liberal Party of the past had become prevalent.³⁷ It is, of course, interesting to pose the question whether the declared reasons for these attacks on Lloyd George were the real ones. His relationship with Frances Stevenson was well-known in establishment circles in the early twenties.³⁸ Yet I have to acknowledge that in many years of poring over

various Baptist sources for the 1920s and 1930s I have yet to come across any overt reference to moral indiscretion on Lloyd George's part.

The years 1932 to 1934 reveal a clear development in Baptist thinking - at least at national leadership level. Broadly speaking, internal Baptist Union issues took on a greater significance. This may have resulted from a loss of clear thinking about the national policies of the government, or it may be indicative of the conscious decision of the leadership of the Baptist Union that, having come to a new consensus of support for the National Government, it should steer away from contentious political and social issues. Indeed, throughout these two years the Baptist Union leadership, in the persons of Aubrey and Carlile, continued their move towards a position of decisive support for the government of national unity. For example, in reporting the growing rift between Liberal and Conservative members of the government, the *Baptist Times* expressed considerable concern that this might allow a Labour victory in any election.³⁹

By January 1934 the *Baptist Times* offered a positive affirmation of support for MacDonald as having fulfilled his mandate as given at the election two years earlier.⁴⁰ The prelude to this declaration is actually to be found three weeks earlier, for on 4 January, rather controversially, the news was leaked that Aubrey had lunched with the Prime Minister (at the invitation of the former).⁴¹ Two months later MacDonald accepted Aubrey's invitation to chair a service of thanksgiving for the centenary of the birth of C. H. Spurgeon. At this service, held in a packed Royal Albert Hall, MacDonald declared himself a Calvinist. The *Baptist Times* was ecstatic, suggesting that the prime minister had the makings of immortality.⁴²

It is clear, then, that by 1934 a definite change in the thinking of Baptist leaders on political matters had become apparent. Trends discerned in the opening years of the decade had developed to the point where the leadership of the Baptist Union felt able to offer overt support for the Conservative-dominated leadership of the National Government. It also spoke out increasingly critically against the non-National Government members of the Labour and Liberal parties. Robbins has highlighted this change of political stance with reference to Free Churches in general, arguing that whatever conclusion one might come to about the ecclesiastical status and beliefs of the most well-known Free Churchmen of the inter-war period, it is clear that because of their divided political allegiance they could not act together as Free Churchmen. They owed their loyalty to their Cabinet colleagues and to their parties.⁴³

In fact, Bebbington suggests that for this period the *Baptist Times*: '... implied a certain Liberal preference . . . Otherwise all evidence of Liberalism had faded from the pages'.⁴⁴ This present study indicates that the move from Liberalism was even more marked: by the mid-thirties the *Baptist Times* was taking a positively pro-Conservative line. Nor should this come as a surprise, for, as Koss points out: 'The formation of a National Government made a mockery of Nonconformist political

allegiances'.⁴⁵ The over-riding reason for these changes is clear - fear of socialism.⁴⁶

A further stage in this deepening disenchantment with Lloyd George's brand of Liberalism came with Aubrey's resignation from the Free Church Council Executive in 1935 in protest at its support for the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction.⁴⁷ The *Baptist Times* gave full coverage of events leading up to the launch of the Council for Action. Its twin expressed concerns for peace and national reconstruction had warmly appealed to the Nonconformist psyche and were initially welcomed by national Free Church leaders.⁴⁸ The National Free Church Council participated in promoting the infant Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction, the failure of the League of Nations contributing not a little to its decision to support the Council for Action. Whilst the Council was constituted ostensibly on a non-party basis under the presidency of Lloyd George and the treasurership of the veteran Baptist lay-leader, Robert Wilson Black,⁴⁹ in a jaundiced but accurate comment, E. A. Payne also suggests that Lloyd George's involvement must be seen in the light of his desire 'for a restoration of his political influence' and because he 'still retained the rather nostalgic loyalty of many Free Churchmen'.⁵⁰ Indeed, the Council's Manifesto, *A Call to Action*, was overtly critical of the National Government.⁵¹

When, in early March, Lloyd George presented his proposals to the Cabinet, the *Baptist Times* initially reacted warmly, commenting: 'For our part, we think that the evils of unemployment, both economic, social and moral, are so terrible that almost any remedy is better than the present policy of doing nothing.'⁵² By early June the Executive of the Free Church Council had resolved to sign the Council of Action's manifesto. It was at this point that Aubrey felt that he must resign from the Executive on the ground that it was being drawn into alliance with a distinct political grouping. Soon he was engaged in earnest correspondence with members of the Executive who could see no harm in signing the manifesto.⁵³ Forced by misrepresentations of his position into making a public statement, he pointed out in the *Baptist Times* of 27 June that he had resigned from the Executive of the Free Church Council because he was opposed to the support the latter had given to the *Call to Action*. He was quite clear: '. . . it seemed to me to drag the Churches into politics'.⁵⁴ Aubrey felt unable merely to carp at the National Government, recognizing not just its weaknesses but also its strengths and successes. He explained that he was not prepared to make any further public comment on the matter. On the Manifesto he was blunt: 'It is frankly an electioneering manifesto'. He concluded: 'This statement is not official. It commits no one but myself. I have never written anything that I disliked more intensely and I hope I shall not have to return to the subject'. *The Times*, whose editorial policy was frankly antagonistic to Lloyd George at this time, reproduced Aubrey's statement in full on the same day.⁵⁵

Letters flooded in to the *Baptist Times* in response to Aubrey's statement. Those

published were largely behind Aubrey.⁵⁶ Among those dissociating themselves from Aubrey were Dr Charles Brown (now retired, but still a force to be reckoned with in Baptist circles) and W. H. Lewis, honorary secretary of the Bradford Baptist Fraternal. A week later there was an extended letter from R. W. Black.⁵⁷ On 29 August S. W. Hughes also inveighed against Aubrey.⁵⁸ Yet Aubrey received many letters of support from Baptist leaders. Three such leaders of particular significance who offered their support were Tydeman Chilvers, Thomas Greenwood and Theo Bamber, who represented the strongly evangelical and apolitical wing of the Baptist Union.⁵⁹ Aubrey also found an unlikely supporter in Mrs D. M. Gotch, General Secretary of the Free Church Women's Council, although she had to crave confidentiality because her 'President does not see the matter as I do'.⁶⁰

That the *Baptist Times* fully understood M. E. Aubrey's concerns is reflected in a feature on 25 July 1935, in which Carlile stated that the *Baptist Times* could give no lead in political matters because its brief was to reflect the variety of views held within the Baptist Union constituent membership. This was a painful time for Aubrey, not least because he was firmly and fervently committed to Free Church unity.⁶¹ Part of the explanation of why Aubrey felt so unhappy with the Council of Action lies in the fact that he both knew and deeply respected several of the leading MPs in or on the fringe of the National Government. Not least of these was Geoffrey Shakespeare, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health and son of Aubrey's predecessor at the Baptist Union, J. H. Shakespeare.⁶² Another was obviously Ernest Brown, about whom the *Baptist Times* had commented two weeks earlier that it was 'especially glad' at Ernest Brown's promotion to Minister of Labour.⁶³ Whilst, most recently, Morris West⁶⁴ largely concurs with this, it is, however, apparently contradicted by correspondence during July 1935 between Aubrey and Arthur Porritt (occasional columnist in the *Baptist Times* and editor of the *Christian World*). In this letter Porritt declared Baldwin to have been taken over by the right of the Conservative Party.⁶⁵ Aubrey, whilst maintaining that he could not sign the manifesto, was also adamant that he had never declared himself a supporter of the National Government.⁶⁶ Bebbington has also suggested that Aubrey was adopting a pragmatic position deriving from the failure of Nonconformists to benefit from their efforts on behalf of the Liberals as long ago as the 1906 election. This is borne out in a letter from Aubrey to S. W. Hughes dated 11 June 1935. Writing of the 1906 alliance between Liberals and Nonconformists, he declared that: 'No one in his senses would claim that the blessing of God rested upon that episode in our story. I do not think we have yet recovered from it.'⁶⁷

An inaugural convention of the Council of Action was held in July, and at the conference which followed,⁶⁸ at which some 350 candidates were proposed for the election later in that year, Dr Sidney Berry, Secretary of the Free Church Council, was deeply concerned. This was precisely the point on which Aubrey had resigned, and that denied by his erstwhile opponents some months earlier, the Free Church

signatories. After debate it was resolved as a concession by the Council to put forward distinctive Council candidates only: 'Where candidates are found to be unsatisfactory . . . it is earnestly hoped there will be no cases of this kind'. It also became clear that such MPs should owe ultimate allegiance to Lloyd George.⁶⁹ Significantly, on 4 July, in his report of the inaugural Convention for the *Baptist Times*, J. C. Carlile admitted his error of judgement. He had: '. . . signed the Manifesto without any idea of the creation of a new Party. I have supported the National Government, and have no intention of changing my allegiance'.⁷⁰

Nor were matters to be left at that point. A leader on 11 July was entitled 'Politics and the Churches'. Its author - presumably Carlile again - declared it to have been written in the light of recent events: 'Our position is that the Church and the State have different functions . . . they are complementary'.⁷¹ In this same edition the letters columns reflected in favour of Aubrey's position.⁷² Interestingly, although E. K. H. Jordan does not see Carlile and Aubrey's criticisms of the *Call to Action* as being valid, being, in his view, a reflection of their conservatism, he still concedes that much of the opposition to the Free Church Council's support of the Council of Action was due to the prominence of 'the notorious figure' of Lloyd George, in whom there had been widespread loss of faith in the years that followed the First World War.⁷³

Despite the reservations of Aubrey and Carlile, the *Baptist Times* continued to give considerable coverage to news of the Council of Action. Lloyd George's 'Organizing Prosperity' proposals (submitted on request to the Committee of MacDonal's Cabinet) received warm front-page coverage.⁷⁴ Carlile noted warmly that, in his view, Lloyd George 'stands up to the questions which have baffled and defeated Governments'.⁷⁵ Carlile also noted that the Executive of the National Free Church Council had decided to: 'advise local Free Church Councils . . . to associate themselves with any local Councils of Action'.⁷⁶ There were, however, four provisos to this recommendation. Firstly, the local group should be acting in line with the resolutions passed at the Annual Assembly of the Council of Action. Secondly, the Free Church Councils should steer clear of party politics. Thirdly, no action should be taken beyond the agreed statement of 29 June 1935. Finally, care should be taken that action should unite rather than divide local Free Church Councils. Also by this date the leadership of the Council of Action had proposed both a National Council of fifty, and the production of pamphlets and leaflets for use in the run-up to the autumn election.⁷⁷

In his inimitable style Aubrey now chose to reflect upon the debate stimulated by his resignation from the National Free Church Council. He reasserted that he was in favour of peace and reconstruction, but that his concerns arose from the party-political slant being given to the Council of Action. He concluded: 'The real question for me is one of the nature and authority of the Church of God . . . But any Church that is truly Christian should be one to which Mr Baldwin, Mr MacDonal and Mr Lloyd George, if they also are truly Christian, could all give

their complete loyalty, whatever their political differences may be.'⁷⁸

That Aubrey was correct in his belief that Lloyd George had a hidden agenda in his leadership of the Council of Action became apparent in the run-up to the 1935 General Election. The *Baptist Times* noted that Lloyd George's New Deal Campaign had as its object the defeat of the government.⁷⁹ As the election approached, the *Baptist Times* reiterated its now clear-cut position on party politics: 'This journal is not the advocate, certainly not the representative of any one political party. We are concerned with Christian principles and are only political so far as those principles are involved'.⁸⁰ Coverage was given to the speeches of a number of candidates, amongst them Stanley Baldwin, Anthony Eden and Ernest Brown.⁸¹

The result of the General Election 'confounded all the prophets', in the view of the *Baptist Times*. The National Government was returned with a majority of 250. Labour had won back ninety of the hundred seats lost in 1931. 'In this respect the new House of Commons is a much better one than the last, for an Opposition strong in numbers and debating power is essential to Parliamentary Government'. Congratulations were in order for Ernest Brown and Geoffrey Shakespeare, although the *Baptist Times* regretted the defeat of the veteran miners' leader and Baptist lay-preacher, William Adamson. Both Sir Herbert Samuel, leader of the Liberal Party, and Isaac Foot, another Liberal, failed to hold their seats and this led the *Baptist Times* to conclude that 'We fear it is the end of the Liberal party as a political force. It is not the end of Liberalism itself, however. On the contrary, we incline to the belief that the disappearance of the Liberal Party marks the triumph of Liberal principles'. Regarding the defeat of both Ramsey MacDonald and his son, the *Baptist Times* commented: 'Labour regarded him and his son as traitors and hated them with bitter hatred'. It concluded that: 'Persons, not politics, dominated the Election, and above all the personality of Mr Baldwin. It was his election, and the result is a great national tribute to his typically British characteristic virtues of sincerity, moderation, fairness and sound common-sense'.⁸²

Discussion in Baptist leadership circles now moved to the inevitable resignation from public life of Baldwin and MacDonald. One or other of them had been Premier since 1923. Religiously, MacDonald had lost touch with the Free Churches after the death in November 1923 of John Clifford who had been a close friend. But when MacDonald finally resigned from Parliament in the autumn of 1937, it was J. C. Carlile who produced a two-page 'Memoir and Appreciation' for the *Baptist Times*.⁸³ Arthur Porritt also spoke well of his principles: 'It was his fate to shatter the political Party which he had spent a lifetime in creating . . . He felt it was his duty to put country before party at all costs, and the cost to him was the loss of priceless friendships'.⁸⁴ After MacDonald's death, later that month, Arthur Porritt could comment with some edge: 'If appreciation was withheld from Ramsey MacDonald in his last years, he has been signally honoured in death. No Prime Minister since Gladstone has received so much homage'.⁸⁵ When Baldwin resigned, J. C. Carlile, in a *Baptist Times* leader, commended him for his calmness

during the abdication crisis: 'No praise will exaggerate the services Stanley Baldwin rendered to this country in that dark and difficult period'.⁸⁶

Porritt was one of many who were not sure of Neville Chamberlain's ability to lead the nation. He wrote in March 1937: 'Though he has been in the political front line for twenty years, Mr Neville Chamberlain has not yet made himself popularly understood'.⁸⁷ Porritt also expressed concern at Chamberlain's weak public *persona* in contrast to Hitler, Mussolini and Roosevelt. He also had a poor voice for wireless broadcasts. At the end of 1938 Porritt reflected that, in six by-elections held since Munich, the government had received 146,615 votes and the opposition parties 146,663. He predicted a General Election prior to the huge increase in arms expenditure that was due in the next budget.⁸⁸

By the final year of the decade the threat of impending European war was obvious to all. So too was the abject failure of the League of Nations to stay the outbreak of war. Another manifesto was, therefore, issued by the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction, outlining the turns in world events since 1935, asserting rather obviously that: 'Since 1935 the years have been marked by complete failure on the part of this country to give courageous leadership in support of a constructive policy of peace'.⁸⁹ Within months the country was, of course, at war.

The debates surrounding the launch of the Council of Action give a useful clue to the political interests of the Baptist leadership during the 1930s. Leaders such as Aubrey, and later Carlile, saw the Council of Action as an opportunist move by Lloyd George to create a multi-party grouping which would fill the void left by the effective parliamentary demise of the Liberal Party. Three factors were seen as creating the need for this grouping: the high rate of unemployment, fear of war, and the rise of the dictators. From the Baptist perspective, lack of grass-roots support for the Council was determined by the withdrawal of support first by Aubrey and then by Carlile. The leadership of the Baptist Union was in no doubt that the best political leadership could be given by the existing all-party Conservative-dominated National Government. This was especially the case under Baldwin's premiership. In fact, of course, in the 1935 General Election the Conservatives won an overwhelming majority. Council of Action candidates did very poorly.

Broadly speaking, Baptist opinion-formers were, by this time, largely pro-Conservative but anti-Chamberlain. For very many Baptists, as the old Liberal-Nonconformist alliance had been eroded by both political fragmentation and denominational stresses and strains, their political allegiances quite simply had become confused.

Finally, the question of the political loyalties of local Baptist churches must be considered. There is clear evidence that, at a local level, the position of the churches closely paralleled that of the Baptist Union. The Croham Road Baptist Church, South Croydon, clearly illustrates this point.⁹⁰ What political sympathy may be discerned from the church records indicates that the church found itself broadly in sympathy with the National Government. Likewise, the Brighton Road

Baptist Church, South Croydon, identified itself with the apolitical stance so characteristic of Baptists at this time.⁹¹ This pattern also pertained at Avenue Baptist Church, Southend,⁹² Brentwood Baptist Church, Essex,⁹³ and even the once politically active Park Road Baptist Church, Rushden, Northamptonshire.⁹⁴

In all of these evangelical Baptist churches, set as they were in the comparative affluence of the South East of England, there can thus be discerned a marked parallel in thought and practice to the central leadership of the Baptist denomination. No strident critique of prevailing social conditions was articulated, and there was a reluctance to engage in positive social action. Thus, if Aubrey and Carlile were intent on leading the Baptist denomination into a broadly Conservative position, the evangelical churches showed every sign, on the whole, of being willing to be led. Or perhaps more accurately, it may be suggested that the lead given by the Baptist Union hierarchy accurately reflected and paralleled the grass-roots changes which had occurred and were still occurring in the churches. These churches represent a distinctive and widely-followed pattern of Baptist church life in Britain in the 1930s.

A second significant social pattern emerges from the study of Baptist churches in the depressed areas of England. For example, in the Yorkshire Baptist Association, the traditional link between chapel and Liberalism was long dead, and in the more working-class churches sympathies with the Labour Party had become well established by the 1930s (although even here, the churches remained cautious about adopting a radical political stance).⁹⁵ The more suburban causes, however, remained solidly Conservative. The great social evils of the day were, as ever, conceived to be cinema, drink, immorality and gambling, thus perpetuating the tendency to drive a social wedge between the church and the unchurched.

Study of the Queen's Road Baptist Church, Coventry, is suggestive of a third, comparatively small, category of Baptist churches in the 1930s.⁹⁶ These were generally larger 'institutional churches' of a more liberal theological persuasion. Under Howard Ingli James, membership at Queen's Road rose steadily from 1930 to 1935 but fell back slowly in the eight remaining years of his ministry. Frankly, this does not appear to have bothered James unduly. He was concerned rather for the demonstration of the Kingdom of God in practical and tangible terms. During these years the church explored the key theme of Christian community and citizenship; emphasis was placed on the needs of young people, and James frequently preached on issues pertaining to economics and unemployment, especially when Coventry was in some way affected. He had a vision for the Kingdom of God on earth and a Christian conscience sensitive to the social, political and economic implications of the Gospel. His political radicalism served as a powerful magnet to many, and such was the manner in which his ideas were presented that he managed to take many of his more Conservative members with him and, even when they could not agree with their pastor, they seemed able to differ one from the other with Christian tolerance and graciousness.

It is clear, then, that by the 1930s, the Liberal Party had lost credibility with

Baptists as a viable opposition party. Yet there remained a deep, almost nostalgic longing on the part of many Baptists for the great days of Liberal consensus. What became apparent in the events of 1935 was that a general shift towards Conservatism was compounded by the reaction of the Baptist Union leadership to the Council of Action. The loss of Old-Liberal allegiances, opposition to Labour Party policies, and a shift towards political neutrality which was *de facto* Conservatism was focused by the Council of Action in 1935. For some Baptists, the Council of Action and the image of a revitalized Lloyd George resulted in a rekindling of nostalgia for the old chapel-Liberal nexus. Yet they too were disappointed and even disillusioned, for that could not be. Indeed, for others, the continued presence of Lloyd George within the Liberal Party was the strongest single reason for their seeking other political allegiances. Times, national politics and Baptist aspirations had moved on. As Hastings puts it: '... caution, retrenchment, moderation and good sense were now to be the deciding qualities of Free Church polity in regard to their own and national affairs'.⁹⁷

NOTES

- 1 D. W. Bebbington, 'Baptists and Politics [?since 1914]', in K. Clement, ed., *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*, 1983, pp.76-95.
- 2 *ibid.*, p.76.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp.77-9.
- 4 *ibid.*, p.79. This decline has been charted more fully in J. F. Glaser, 'English Nonconformity and the Decline of Liberalism', *American Historical Review*, 1958, pp.63ff; cf. J. Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, 1984, pp.358f.
- 5 Bebbington, *op.cit.*, p.80. See also Stevenson, *op.cit.*, p.367; A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*, 1991, p.23.
- 6 N. Branson, *Poplarism 1919-1925: George Lansbury and the Councillors' Revolt*, 1979, pp.201f.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp.205, 214f. Interestingly, there is no evidence of Baptist involvement in Poplarism, although several Anglican, Roman Catholic and Congregationalist councillors were jailed for their actions in 1921; cf Branson, pp.232ff.
- 8 *Baptist Times* (hereafter *BT*), 2/1/30, p.9.
- 9 *BT* 6/2/30, p.91.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *BT* 17/4/30, p.270; 12/6/30, p.421.
- 12 *BT* 8/5/30, p.325.
- 13 *BT* 4/9/30, p.627.
- 14 *BT* 6/11/30, p.779. On the issue of Lloyd George and electoral reform, see J. Grigg, 'Lloyd George and Electoral Reform', in J. M. W. Bean, ed., *The Political Culture of Modern Britain*, 1987, pp.165-77.
- 15 *BT* 11/12/30, p.891.
- 16 *BT* 23/1/30, p.59.
- 17 *ibid.*, p.54.
- 18 See for example, *BT* 30/1/30, p.75; 6/2/30, p.91; 7/8/30, p.563.
- 19 *BT* 3/4/30, p.231.
- 20 *BT* 27/2/30, p.143; 7/8/30, p.563; 14/8/30, p.579; 28/8/30, p.611. Cf W. M. Miller and G. Raab, 'The Religious Alignment at English Elections between 1918 and 1970', *Political Studies*, 1970, XXV, no.2, p.228.
- 21 *BT* 13/2/30, p.107.
- 22 *BT* 23/10/30, p.739.
- 23 *BT* 6/11/30, p.779.
- 24 *BT* 25/11/30, p.979; see also *Records of the Baptist World Alliance Congress 1934*, pp.57-62.
- 25 *BT* 9/4/31, p.249.
- 26 *BT* 26/2/31, pp.149, 152; 25/6/31, p.445; 2/7/31, p.459; 23/7/31, pp.514, 516; 30/7/31, p.553; 19/11/31, p.813.
- 27 *BT* 22/1/31, p.67; cf 5/2/31, p.99; 19/3/31 p.220; 16/7/31, p.497.
- 28 *BT* 12/2/31, p.116.
- 29 *BT* 5/3/31, p.163.
- 30 See, for example, the comments of Walter Davies, minister of Croham Road Baptist Church, in M. L. Goodman, 'English and Welsh Baptists in the 1930s: a study in Political, Social and Religious Crisis', Open University PhD,

- 1993, pp.224f.
- 31 *BT* 14/5/31, p.347; 11/6/31, p.415; 13/8/31, pp.563, 567.
- 32 *BT* 3/9/31, p.615.
- 33 *BT* 5/11/31, p.775.
- 34 *BT* 4/2/32, p.75; 28/4/32, p.291; 6/10/32, p.683.
- 35 *BT* 21/4/32, p.271.
- 36 *BT* 5/5/32, p.307.
- 37 cf. S. Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, 1975, pp.145ff.
- 38 Most recently, see R. Longford, *Frances, Countess Lloyd George: More Than A Mistress*, 1996.
- 39 *BT* 23/11/33, p.799.
- 40 *BT* 25/1/34, p.63.
- 41 *BT* 8/3/34, p.163.
- 42 *BT* 3/5/54, p.317. The nature of the friendship between MacDonald and Aubrey is worthy of further study. It has been suggested that they had links either via the Athenaeum Club or as Freemasons in the so-called Kingsgate Lodge. As for the former, MacDonald was elected a member in 1924 under Rule II. This was an invitation from the General Committee to a person 'of outstanding merit in their field'. Aubrey was not elected under Rule II until 1938. There is no substantive evidence for a Freemasonic Lodge at Baptist Church House, let alone membership within it of key political and Baptist figures. The probability is that the friendship between MacDonald and Aubrey - as for that between Lloyd George and J. H. Shakespeare twenty years earlier - was on a personal level [Personal correspondence with Sarah Dodgson, Librarian at the Athenaeum]; cf Hastings, *op.cit.*, pp.54f.
- 43 K. Robbins, 'Free Churchmen and the Twenty Years Crisis', *BQ* 1978, XXVII, no.1, pp.346f.
- 44 Bebbington, *op.cit.*, p.79.
- 45 Koss, *op.cit.*, p.184; cf A. Thorpe, 'I am in the Cabinet: J. H. Thomas' Decision to join the National Government in 1931', *English Historical Review*, Oxford 1991, 64:155, pp.389ff.
- 46 D. Thompson, in R. Davies, ed., *The Testing of the Churches 1932-1982*, 1982, p.108.
- 47 *ibid.*, p.109; cf. S. Koss, 'Lloyd George and Nonconformity: the last rally', *English Historical Review*, LXXXIX, 1974, pp.77-108; Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern English Politics*, Cap.9, 'The Last Rally', pp.187ff; cf. W. M. S. West, 'The Reverend Secretary Aubrey: Part 1', *BQ*, 1992, XXXIV, pp.204ff.
- 48 See, for example, *BT* 24/1/35, p.71; cf *The Times*, 18/1/31, p.7; 26/1/31, p.14.
- 49 H. Townsend, *Robert Wilson Black*, 1954, pp.154ff.
- 50 E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union*, 1958, p.207.
- 51 Townsend, *op.cit.*, pp.155f. See also *BT* 13/6/35, p.439.
- 52 *BT* 14/3/35, p.203.
- 53 See, for example, the following correspondence: Aubrey to Ernest Brown, 7/6/35; S. W. Hughes to Aubrey, 12/6/35; Aubrey to Hughes, 14/6/35; Sidney Berry to Aubrey, 11/6/35; Aubrey to Berry, 12/6/35; Hughes to Aubrey, 12/6/35; Aubrey to Hughes, 14/6/35, 17/6/35, 18/6/35; Arthur Porritt to Aubrey, 15/6/35; Aubrey to Porritt, 17/6/35; William Olney to Aubrey, 20/6/35; Hughes to Aubrey, 21/6/35; Aubrey to Olney, 24/6/35; Aubrey to J. D. Jones, 26/6/35; J. D. Jones to Aubrey, 20/6/35; Aubrey to J. C. Carlile, 5/7/35. See also: telegrams to R. W. Black, S. Berry and S. W. Hughes, 11/6/35 (all to be found in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford).
- 54 *BT* 27/6/35, p.475. The debate in the *Baptist Times* parallels that in *The Times* for this period; cf. *The Times* 15/6/35, p.13 (critical leader accusing the New Deal of being more 'of political mischief than of Christianity'); 18/6/35, p.12 (letter from S. W. Hughes attacking the stance taken by *The Times* leader writer); 19/6/35, p.10 (letters from J. S. Lidgett in support of Lloyd George; V. A. Caalet MP, expressing the view that the Council was a fruitless exercise); cf. the letters columns of 20/6/35, p.10, 22/6/35, p.10, 4/7/35, p.10, 5/7/35, p.10, 6/7/35, p.8. Aubrey actually wrote confidentially to Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times*, explaining his position on 13/6/35.
- 55 *The Times*, 27/6/35, p.12.
- 56 See, for example, *BT* 18/7/35, p.532.
- 57 *BT* 25/7/35, p.553.
- 58 *BT* 29/8/35, p.632. See also: *BT* 1/3/35, p.564; 8/8/35, p.584; 15/8/35, p.600; 22/8/35, p.616; 5/9/35, p.648; 3/10/35, p.712.
- 59 Tydeman Chilvers to Aubrey, 8/7/35; Aubrey to Chilvers, 27/6/35; Thomas Greenwood to Aubrey, 8/7/35; Aubrey to Greenwood, 29/6/35; Theo Bamber to Aubrey, 27/6/35.
- 60 Mrs D. M. Gotch to Aubrey, 1/7/35.
- 61 cf M. E. Aubrey, *The Free Churches in our National Life*, nd, pp.10f.
- 62 *BT* 28/3/35, p.241.
- 63 *BT* 13/6/35, p.443. See also: Bebbington,

- 67 Aubrey to S. W. Hughes, 11/6/35.
 68 *BT* 27/6/35, pp.456, 479.
 69 *BT* 4/7/35, p.494.
 70 *ibid.*
 71 *BT* 11/7/35, p.515.
 72 *ibid.*, p.516.
 73 E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity: A History of the Free Church Council Movement, 1896-1941*, 1956, pp.163f.
 74 *BT* 18/7/35, p.529.
 75 *ibid.*, p.530.
 76 *ibid.*
 77 *ibid.*, p.535.
 78 *BT* 1/8/35, p.563.
 79 *BT* 22/8/35, p.619.
 80 *BT* 7/11/35, p.811.
 81 *BT* 14/11/35, p.831.
 82 *BT* 21/11/35, p.851.
 83 *BT* 18/11/37, pp.864f.
 84 *B T* 1 8 / 1 1 / 3 7 , p . 8 7 1 . 8 5
BT 2/12/37, p.911.
 86 *BT* 22/4/37, p.299; 3/6/37, p.423. Significantly, the *Baptist Times* had supported Baldwin throughout the crisis and had, in fact, never really had full confidence in Edward VIII, seeing him as somewhat weak and decadent; cf *BT* 23/1/36, p.69; *Annual Report of the Baptist Union: 1935*, *BT* p.7; 23/1/36, pp.71f; 30/1/36, pp.81f; 6/2/36 pp.96f; 9/4/36, p.274; 27/8/36, p.655; 22/10/36, p.803; 12/11/36, p.859; 19/11/36, p.881; 26/11/36, p.901; 10/12/36, p.959; 3/12/36, p.922; 10/12/36, pp.961, 963; 17/12/36, pp.984f; 17/12/36 p.979; 17/12/36, p.983; 17/12/36, p.987; 28/1/37, p.65; 1/4/37, p.247; *Annual Report: 1937*, p.7.
 87 *BT* 18/3/37, p.207.
 88 *BT* 1/12/38, p.907.
 89 *BT* 27/2.39, p.157.
 90 Goodman, *op.cit.*, pp.221ff.
 91 *ibid.*, pp.246ff.
 92 *ibid.*, pp.299ff.
 93 *ibid.*, pp.302f.
 94 *ibid.*, pp.303ff.
 95 *ibid.*, pp.287ff.
 96 *ibid.*, pp.295ff.
 97 Hastings, *op.cit.*, p.263.

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- ABINGDON Baptist Church** Additional records of Abingdon Baptist Church 1776-1986 (deposited by the Revd M. Hambleton).
BAPTIST UNION Photograph album of Baptist Union of Great Britain's visit to Moscow, 1970 (gift from the Revd Dr W. M. S. West, President of the Baptist Historical Society).
BENTLEY, H. Photographs of Holman Bentley, Bennett, Mussell and others, c.1875-1880 (gift from the Revd Dr W. M. S. West).
CAREY, S. P. Fragmentary letter by Samuel Pearce Carey, undated (gift from Dr R. Allaway of Llanbradach).
COLLINS, J. Commonplace book and verses by John Collins of Devizes and Broughton, second half of eighteenth century (gift from the Revd Dr P. Fiddes, Principal of Regent's Park College).
HUGHES, S. Scrapbook of news-cuttings relating to the career of the Revd Samuel Hughes of Westbourne Park Church, Paddington, died 1954 (deposited via the Revd P. Withers of Plymouth).
ROBINSON, T. Burkett bronze medal for theological studies awarded by the British Academy to Theodore Robinson, and covering letter, 1946 (presented by the family).
STOCK, J. Manuscript journal of a visit to the United States of America by the Revd John Stock, 1867, and letter from his daughter, Beatrice Stock (gift from the Revd M. Ball of Llanishen).
[Continued on p.95]