

# The Baptist Doctrine of the Church.

*A Statement approved by the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, March, 1948.*

1. The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland represents more than three thousand churches and about three hundred thousand members. Through its membership in the Baptist World Alliance it is in fellowship with other Baptist communities throughout the world numbering about thirteen million, who have accepted the responsibilities of full communicant membership.

Baptists have a continuous history in Great Britain since the beginning of the seventeenth century. Many of their principles, however, were explicitly proclaimed in the second half of the sixteenth century by the radical wing of the Reformation movement. They claim as their heritage also the great central stream of Christian doctrine and piety through the centuries, and have continuity with the New Testament Church in that they rejoice to believe and seek faithfully to proclaim the Apostolic Gospel and endeavour to build up the life of their churches after what seems to them the New Testament pattern.

## THE ONE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

2. Although Baptists have for so long held a position separate from that of other communions, they have always claimed to be part of the one holy catholic Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. They believe in the catholic Church as the holy society of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, which He founded, of which He is the only Head, and in which He dwells by His Spirit, so that though manifested in many communions, organised in various modes, and scattered throughout the world, it is yet one in Him.<sup>1</sup> The Church is the Body of Christ and a chosen instrument of the divine purpose in history.

In the worship, fellowship and witness of the one Church we know ourselves to be united in the communion of saints, not only with all believers upon earth, but also with those who have entered into life everlasting.

The origin of the Church is in the Gospel—in the mighty acts of God, the Incarnation, Ministry, Death, Resurrection and

<sup>1</sup> See Reply of the Baptist Union Annual Assembly to the Lambeth Conference *Appeal to all Christian People*, May 4th, 1926.

Ascension of our Lord and the Descent of the Holy Spirit. Thus it is the power of God in Christ which created the Church and which sustains it through the centuries. It is historically significant that Christ, at the outset of His ministry, "chose twelve to be with Him" and gathered His people into a new community. In our judgement there is no evidence in the New Testament to show that He formally organised the Church, but He did create it. This "New Israel," the expansion of which is recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Epistles*, is the heir to the "Old Israel," yet it is marked by vital and significant differences. It is based upon the New Covenant; membership is not constituted by racial origins but by a personal allegiance; the ritual of temple and synagogue has given place to the ordinances of the Gospel and the national consciousness has widened to world horizons. The Messianic community was reborn by the events of the Gospel and is "a new creation." Therefore, whilst there is an historical continuity with the Old Israel, Old Testament analogies do not determine the character and structure of the New Testament Church.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF LOCAL BAPTIST CHURCHES

3. (a) It is in membership of a local church in one place that the fellowship of the one holy catholic 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 xx, 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 in eternity, both militant and triumphant. To worship and serve in such a local Christian community is, for Baptists, of the essence of Churchmanship.

Such churches are gathered by the will of Christ and live by the indwelling of His Spirit. They do not have their origin, primarily, in human resolution. Thus the Baptist Confession of 1677,<sup>2</sup> which deals at length with doctrine and church order, uses phrases which indicate that local churches are formed by the response of believing men to the Lord's command. Out of many such phrases we may quote the following: "Therefore they do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ." Churches are gathered "according to His mind, declared in His word." Membership was not regarded as a private option, for the *Confession* continues: "All believers are bound to join

<sup>2</sup> W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 265f.

themselves to particular churches when and where they have opportunity so to do." In our tradition discipleship involves both church membership and a full acceptance of the idea of churchmanship.

(b) The basis of our membership in the church is a conscious and deliberate acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord by each individual. There is, we hold, a personal crisis in the soul's life when a man stands alone in God's presence, responds to God's gracious activity, accepts His forgiveness and commits himself to the Christian way of life. Such a crisis may be swift and emotional or slow-developing and undramatic, and is normally experienced within and because of our life in the Christian community, but it is always a personal experience wherein God offers His salvation in Christ, and the individual, responding by faith, receives the assurance of the Spirit that by grace he is the child of God. It is this vital evangelical experience which underlies the Baptist conception of the Church and is both expressed and safeguarded by the sacrament of Believers' Baptism.

(c) The life of a gathered Baptist church centres in worship, in the preaching of the Word, in the observance of the two sacraments of Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in growth in fellowship and in witness and service to the world outside. Our forms of worship are in the Reformed tradition and are not generally regulated by liturgical forms. Our tradition is one of spontaneity and freedom, but we hold that there should be disciplined preparation of every part of the service. The sermon, as an exposition of the Word of God and a means of building up the faith and life of the congregation, has a central place in public worship. The scriptures are held by us to be the primary authority both for the individual in his belief and way of life and for the Church in its teaching and modes of government. It is the objective revelation given in scripture which is the safeguard against a purely subjective authority in religion. We firmly hold that each man must search the scriptures for himself and seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit to interpret them. We know also that Church history and Christian experience through the centuries are a guide to the meaning of scripture. Above all, we hold that the eternal Gospel—the life, death and resurrection of our Lord—is the fixed point from which our interpretation, both of the Old and New Testaments, and of later developments in the Church, must proceed.

The worship, preaching, sacramental observances, fellowship and witness are all congregational acts of the whole church in which each member shares responsibility, for all are held to be of equal standing in Christ, though there is a diversity of gifts and a difference of functions. This responsibility and this equality are

focused in the church meeting which, under Christ, cares for the well-being of the believing community and appoints its officers. It is the responsibility of each member, according to his gifts, to build up the life of his brother and to maintain the spiritual health of the church (Rom. xv, 14). It is the church meeting which takes the responsibility of exercising that discipline whereby the church withdraws from members who are unruly and have ceased to share in her convictions and life.

The church meeting, though outwardly a democratic way of ordering the affairs of the church, has deeper significance. It is the occasion when, as individuals and as a community, we submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and stand under the judgements of God that we may know what is the mind of Christ. We believe that the structure of local churches just described springs from the Gospel and best preserves its essential features.

(d) The Christian doctrine of the Trinity asserts a relationship of Persons within the Godhead, and God has revealed Himself in the Person of His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Thus the Gospel is the basis of the Christian evaluation of men and women as persons. Behind the idea of the gathered church lies the profound conviction of the importance of each man's growth to spiritual maturity and of the responsibility which, as a member of the divine family, he should constantly exercise.

(e) Although each local church is held to be competent, under Christ, to rule its own life, Baptists, throughout their history, have been aware of the perils of isolation and have sought safeguards against exaggerated individualism. From the seventeenth century there have been "Associations" of Baptist churches which sometimes appointed Messengers; more recently, their fellowship with one another has been greatly strengthened by the Baptist Union, the Baptist Missionary Society and the Baptist World Alliance. In recent years, General Superintendents have been appointed by the Baptist Union to have the care of churches in different areas. Indeed, we believe that a local church lacks one of the marks of a truly Christian community if it does not seek the fellowship of other Baptist churches, does not seek a true relationship with Christians and churches of other communions and is not conscious of its place in the one catholic Church. To quote again from the Confession of 1677:—

"As each church and all the members of it are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ in all places; and upon occasions to further it . . . so the churches . . . ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love and mutual edification."

## THE MINISTRY

4. A properly ordered Baptist church will have its duly appointed officers. These will include the minister (or pastor), elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers and other church workers. The Baptist conception of the ministry is governed by the principle that it is a ministry of a church and not only a ministry of an individual. It is the church which preaches the Word and celebrates the sacraments, and it is the church which, through pastoral oversight, feeds the flock and ministers to the world. It normally does these things through the person of its minister, but not solely through him. Any member of the church may be authorised by it, on occasion, to exercise the functions of the ministry, in accordance with the principle of the priesthood of all believers, to preach the Word, to administer baptism, to preside at the Lord's table, to visit, and comfort or rebuke members of the fellowship.

Baptists, however, have had from the beginning an exalted conception of the office of the Christian minister and have taken care to call men to serve as pastors. The minister's authority to exercise his office comes from the call of God in his personal experience, but this call is tested and approved by the church of which he is a member and (as is increasingly the rule) by the representatives of a large group of churches. He receives intellectual and spiritual training and is then invited to exercise his gift in a particular sphere. His authority, therefore, is from Christ through the believing community. It is not derived from a chain of bishops held to be lineally descended from the Apostles, and we gratefully affirm that to our non-episcopal communities, as to those episcopally governed, the gifts of the Spirit and the power of God are freely given.

Many among us hold that since the ministry is the gift of God to the Church and the call to exercise the functions of a minister comes from Him, a man who is so called is not only the minister of a local Baptist church but also a minister of the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

Ordination takes place when a man has satisfactorily completed his college training and has been called to the pastorate of a local church, appointed to chaplaincy service or accepted for service abroad by the Committee of the Baptist Missionary Society. The ordination service is presided over by either the Principal of his college, a General Superintendent or a senior minister and is shared in by other ministers and lay representatives of the church. Though there is no prescribed or set form of service, it invariably includes either a personal statement of faith or answers to a series of questions regarding the faith. From the seventeenth century onwards, ordination took place with the

laying on of hands: in the nineteenth century this custom fell into disuse, but is now again increasingly practised.

#### THE SACRAMENTS

5. In the preceding sections we have sought to describe the life and ministry of Baptist churches. It is in their total activity of worship and prayer, sacrament and service that the grace of God is continuously given to believing men and women.

We recognize the two sacraments of Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper as being of the Lord's ordaining. We hold that both are "means of grace" to those who receive them in faith, and that Christ is really and truly present, not in the material elements, but in the heart and mind and soul of the believer and in the Christian community which observes the sacrament. Our confidence in this rests upon the promises of Christ and not upon any power bestowed on the celebrant in virtue of ordination or succession in ministry. We believe it is important not to isolate the sacraments from the whole action of divine grace, but to see them always in the context of the total activity of the worshipping, believing and serving fellowship of the church.

Following the guidance of the New Testament we administer Baptism only to those who have made a responsible and credible profession of "repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." Such persons are then immersed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Salvation is the work of God in Christ, which becomes operative when it is accepted in faith. Thus we do not baptize infants. There is, however, a practice in our churches of presenting young children at a service of public worship where the responsibilities of the parents and the church are recognized and prayers are offered for the parents and the child. Baptists believe that from birth all children are within the love and care of the heavenly Father and therefore within the operation of the saving grace of Christ; hence they have never been troubled by the distinction between baptized and unbaptized children. They have had a notable share with other groups of Christian people in service to children in Sunday schools, orphanages, education and child welfare.

We would claim that the baptism of believers by immersion is in accordance with and sets forth the central facts of the Gospel. It is an "acted creed." We value the symbolism of immersion following the Pauline teaching of the believer's participation in the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord (Romans vi, 3). As a matter of history, however, the recovery of the truth that baptism is only for believers preceded by some years the return by Baptists to the primitive mode of baptizing by immersion, and it is a credible and responsible profession of faith on the part of the

candidate for baptism which we hold to be essential to the rite. As a means of grace to the believer and to the church and as an act of obedience to our Lord's command, we treasure this sacrament. The New Testament clearly indicates a connection of the gift of the Holy Spirit with the experience of baptism which, without making the rite the necessary or inevitable channel of that gift, yet makes it the appropriate occasion of a new and deeper reception of it.

The Lord's Supper is celebrated regularly in our churches. The form of service, which is "congregational" and in which laymen have a part, preserves the New Testament conception of the Supper as an act of fellowship, a community meal. Yet as baptism is more than a dramatic representation of the facts of our redemption, so the Communion Service is more than a commemoration of the Last Supper and a showing forth "of the Lord's death until He come." Here the grace of God is offered and is received in faith; here the real presence of Christ is manifest in the joy and peace both of the believing soul and of the community; here we are in communion, not only with our fellow-members in the church, not only with the Church militant on earth and triumphant in heaven, but also with our risen and glorified Lord.

Membership of our local churches is normally consequent on Believers' Baptism, but differences of outlook and practice exist amongst us. "Close Membership" Baptist churches receive into their membership only those who have professed their faith in Christ by passing through the waters of baptism: "Open Membership" churches, though they consist, in the main, of baptized believers, receive also those Christians who profess such faith otherwise than in Believers' Baptism.

Similar differences are to be found amongst us on the question of those who may partake of the Lord's Supper. "Close Communion" churches invite to the Lord's table only those baptized on profession of faith. "Open Communion" churches welcome to the service all "who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." These differences do not prevent churches of different types from being in fellowship one with another nor from co-operating in the work of the Baptist Union, the Baptist Missionary Society and the Baptist World Alliance. They are united in the conviction that, in New Testament teaching, personal faith in Christ is essential to the sacraments of the Gospel and the membership of the Church.

#### CHURCH AND STATE

6. Our conviction of Christ's Lordship over His Church leads us to insist that churches formed by His will must be free

from all other rule in matters relating to their spiritual life. Any form of control by the State in these matters appears to us to challenge the "Crown Rights of the Redeemer." We also hold that this freedom in Christ implies the right of the Church to exercise responsible self-government. This has been the Baptist position since the seventeenth century, and it appears to us that the growth of the omniscient state and the threat to liberty which has appeared in many parts of the world today make more than ever necessary this witness to spiritual freedom and responsibility which has always been characteristic of the Baptist movement.

This freedom, however, has not led to irresponsibility in our duties as citizens. We believe it is a Christian obligation to honour and serve the State and to labour for the well-being of all men and women. Baptists have shared in many working-class movements, have a not undistinguished record in social service, and were pioneers in the modern missionary movement. They hold that there is a responsibility laid upon each member of the church and upon the churches themselves to apply their faith to all the perplexities of contemporary life.

It will be seen that in this statement of the doctrine of the Church the emphasis falls time and again upon the central fact of evangelical experiences, that when God offers His forgiveness, love and power the gift must be personally accepted in faith by each individual. From this follows the believer's endeavour to walk in the way of the Lord and to be obedient to His commandments. From this follows, also, our traditional defence of civil and religious liberty. It governs our conception of the Church and our teaching on Believers' Baptism. Gratefully recognizing the gifts bestowed by God upon other communions, we offer these insights which He has entrusted to us for the service of His whole Church.

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