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Baptists and the Future

I HAVE open before me the first essay I read to Dr. Payne when I was a student at Oxford. Its title is "The Origins of Christian Baptism". I remember writing it. I remember reading it to Dr. Payne and I can still hear the dead silence which followed when I had finished. It was my first Oxford essay. I thought it a masterpiece. I had read the required books—Marsh and Flemington *et alia*. I had taken all the theories and woven them together into a sort of theological patchwork quilt. Between us it seemed we had solved the problem of the origin of Christian Baptism. I awaited the verdict on my erudition with confidence. When Dr. Payne spoke he said—in what I was to learn very quickly was his gamma double minus tone—"Yes—but why?" The arguments and points of view expressed were all very well—but they were not mine. I had simply collected them together. I had not considered them critically nor thought through their implications. In that tutorial and the many others that followed, Dr. Payne taught me to try to think through issues. The *status quo*, the accepted theory, the majority opinion were not to be accepted without question. What was required was an assessment of the evidence, a consideration of the possibilities, and then to set down a constructive point of view of the matter in hand. This point of view was one that would have to be defended against the incisive attacks of the tutor, but rather an original point of view in ruins than an uncritical statement of other people's ideas. The result was that one was taught to become a constructive critic.

Dr. Payne has spoken more than once of his early days on the Baptist Union Council when he and other people—now, like him, elder statesmen—used to ask awkward questions, not to destroy, but to plant new ideas, to test possibilities, to build up new patterns for the future, to try to be critical in a constructive way. This is why, when Dr. Payne has, in his capacity as General Secretary of the Baptist Union, had to face awkward questions, he has often seemed to welcome them and to deal with them with patience. Many of those questions have come from people whom he taught to ask them! That is why, also, what follows is written in an issue of THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY devoted to honouring him. It is an essay which challenges the *status quo*. I hope Dr. Payne will accept that to write thus is to honour the sort of exciting teacher he was. I hope, too, that the argument of the essay will be marked by him—if not gamma plus—at least gamma query plus!

The Facts of the Situation

Baptists believe that to become a Christian requires a personal acceptance by faith that Jesus Christ is Lord. They further believe that such an acceptance is set forth as the believer enters the Church through believers' baptism. As a natural outcome of these acts Baptists hold that responsible church membership and christian witness belong inseparably to the Christian life.

Becoming a Christian and continuing as a Christian require worship, preaching, teaching and fellowship within a local church. The activity of Christian witness similarly arises from within the local church and is based upon it. It is a requirement for Baptists that there should be effective local churches which are proper units for worship and preaching, teaching and the true fellowship which leads to Christian witness. The Baptist Statement on the Church prepared in 1948 says :

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. . . . To worship and serve in such a local Christian community is, for Baptists, of the essence of churchmanship.

This means, in turn, that there must be a properly trained ministry, effectively dispersed amongst local churches. Without a proper ministry serving in lively local churches, the Baptist understanding of the Gospel and the witness to it will stand in jeopardy.

It is the contention of this article that, as Baptists, we need to re-examine our total situation in regard to the size and location of local churches and the dispersal of the ministry amongst them. It is surely impossible and undesirable to separate these matters from the openly expressed concern about spiritual weakness and decline. If there is a spiritual problem facing us, its solution cannot lie simply with a personal and individual reconsecration to our Lord, the context of the local church in which such a reconsecration takes place and is worked out in practice is surely relevant.

Statistics are notoriously dangerous but it is necessary for our purpose to illustrate the present situation in the denomination by quoting statistics, which, even if they are not exact, illustrate an unmistakable trend. The figures quoted refer to the scene as presented in England and the South Wales area.

1. There are over 2,000 local churches but fewer than 1 in 4 have a membership of more than 100. In every church-membership families are involved. This means that the number of wage earners is less than the actual membership. In the church of which I am, at present, minister, the membership is about 350, but the number of giving units, i.e. wage earners, is just under 200. Whilst this

may be not an average figure, it illustrates clearly the dangers of working out financial liability and possibility on membership figures alone. It is certainly true that in churches of under 100 members the financial burden is being borne by a relatively small number of members.

2. There are about 1,330 ministers to serve some 2,300 church fellowships. Of these ministers over half are serving (as might be expected) in churches of less than 100 members and 850 are in churches of less than 125 members.

3. Even allowing for grouping of churches, there must be several hundred church fellowships which have not got and can never have a minister. In fact, we are told that at the present time about 150 church fellowships are actively seeking a minister. When they call one, another church will be without. In the summer of 1967 about 50 students are coming out from our colleges and although the number of men who will leave the pastoral ministry, whether for retirement or other reason, is unpredictable, the overall situation is unlikely to change.

Whilst the number of churches grouping together under one minister is, we understand, increasing and whilst we recognize the fine work done by lay pastors, it is surely at least arguable that the situation is far from healthy and requires us to consider our Christian stewardship of the local churches from the point of view of members, ministers and buildings.

Membership

From the above figures it is obvious that many of our church members either have no ministerial oversight or, if they have, will be functioning as Christians in small fellowships. This situation presents particular problems to the member. Whilst not one of us doubts the promise of our Lord that where two or three are gathered in His name He will be in the midst, to worship week in and week out with a small handful of people is not an encouraging experience. The more so when it is the same small company (or less) who gather to do the business of the church in church meeting, or come together to study the Bible, or to teach in the Sunday School, or to lead an organisation, or to act as witnesses to the faith in the surrounding areas. It will also be the same small company who will be financially responsible for the church and who will be burdened down with the very real problem of just "keeping the doors open" — a problem which inhibits the very joy and possibility of enthusiastic outreach. Within a small fellowship also the tensions of personal relationships are more liable to come to the surface and when they do the effect is more devastating and destructive than in a larger fellowship. To write thus is in no way to denigrate the mag-

nificent work which Baptist church members perform in small churches, often against great odds, but it raises the issue as to whether it is a proper stewardship of our membership to expect them to go on in this way.

Most years, as a denomination, we record a decline in the numbers of members. We all know that this is not because we lose by death more than we baptize into membership—at least this is not the whole story. We need to examine very closely the reasons for our losses of those who are baptized and join the church in the enthusiastic faith of a Christian and then seem to lose heart and give up. It could be that we do not nourish them in the worship and teaching and fellowship and witness of the local church effectively. All of us in the pastorate know of new-comers to our locality who have been in active church membership elsewhere and who, when visited on arrival, say that they really must have a break from the burdens of church life. Perhaps this is merely an excuse for laziness, but there must be a reason for making the excuse for once they must have known the joy of the Lord in baptism. It has been said in many contexts that Baptists are known to be magnificent pioneers but not very good at consolidating. An effective local church is the place for consolidating the church member in the Christian life. Is the small and often struggling local church the place to do this?

Ministry

We train our ministry in colleges and many of the students take university degrees. We send them out into the local church to fulfil their calling. More than half of our ministry serve in churches of less than 100 members. Furthermore evidence would appear to suggest that the majority of these churches do not grow in membership to any significant extent, e.g. from 75 to 200 members over the years. This means that ministers are faced with small congregations to lead in worship Sunday by Sunday and even smaller groups to teach during the week. The church meeting is also usually very small. The minister, instead of having a missionary force to encourage, prepare and serve with, finds a fellowship faced with a fight for survival.

It is, of course, quite true that numbers are not everything but many men feel that they are rather more important in considering congregations to which to preach and groups for teaching than is often recognized. Great preaching and great congregations are not unrelated to each other.

The situation is made more difficult by the lack of financial resources to pay the minister adequately. We rejoice in the upward trend of the Home Work Fund scheme. We accept the argument that a minister is provided with living accommodation. We take note also of the generally accepted idea that to be a minister must

involve sacrifice, including the idea of financial sacrifice. We do not challenge this last point but merely make a comment. The idea of an ascetic ministry is ages old and is accepted as one concept of the ministry. It means that the minister relies on the charity of others, he does not marry, he lives frugally and is recognized as a separate class within society. This is not the Baptist understanding of the ministry. We need to ask ourselves what economic view we do take of the ministry. Is it of a labourer worthy of his hire? The danger at the moment is that the ministry could become a company of well educated men with family commitments and an appearance to keep up in society but whose life becomes a strain because of their financial inability to cope. A minister is bound to discover how different things are for other well-educated men in society. The minister's children are bound to discover that they cannot do and buy much of what other children do and buy. The minister's wife finds the same thing in the home—a home which she cannot call her own because of course it isn't—and she can see no prospect of saving for an ultimate home. At all costs a minister must seek to keep up appearances so that he may be an accepted member of the society in which he must live.

Now all this is written for at least two reasons. The first is to plead for a recognition of the financial tensions facing many men in the ministry—a ministry which is of a family man living and working as part of society. That many ministers live bravely and well in the face of these tensions is not to deny their existence. But we do need to recognize that we are accepting tacitly now a double standard of living—one for the ministry and one for the laity. This is illustrated further when the suggestion is made that some professionally qualified layman should be invited to fill a denominational or other post occupied by a minister and the answer is given that it would not be possible because of the salary. This has never seemed fair to the laity who might well be prepared to sacrifice if need be but it certainly suggests a double standard of living. Are we really sure that this is what is right?

The second reason is to indicate what is happening in this present situation. Many ministers are doing paid work alongside their pastoral responsibilities. The Baptist Union is amending its regulations to allow more and more men to do other paid work in all sorts of occupations in addition to the pastorate. The reason for this is not only to supplement their income but also to allow those with the smaller memberships to give them a sense of doing "a full time job". The whole situation is thus paradoxical because, as we have seen, there is a very real shortage of ministers in the pastorate and very many churches can have no pastoral oversight. But more than this there is developing a question as to whether the pastoral ministry in these days should occupy a man's full-time anyway.

It is the conviction of the writer that we require to make it possible

financially for ministers to devote their whole time to the pastoral ministry. There should be no financial necessity for them to be part-time school teachers. We need to face the question as to whether the argument that so to teach gives opportunity for further contacts outside the church's life is not a rationalisation of the situation. Whilst there is certainly room for specialized ministries within the church, the basic ministry is still that of the pastor (presbyter, bishop—call him what you will) of the local congregation. Let us make no mistake about it, he is greatly needed still. In these days the tensions of life are great and more people than we sometimes think are nearer to breaking point than might outwardly appear. A pastor moving amongst his congregation becomes sensitive to developing crises. Any truth there may have been in the caricature of the minister moving from one cup of tea to another in the houses of well-meaning church members is now gone. The minister, like the doctor, moves from one point of real need to another. It is time-consuming and exhausting but it is the real work of the pastor as he follows the pattern of our Lord. In all this work there is the ever growing co-operation of doctors with ministers. The doctor recognizes that the minister has a part to play in the helping of needy people and recognizes that his own role is different to that of a minister. An alliance between the medical profession and the ministry is long overdue and can be of the greatest benefit to society. There are signs that it is on the way. There must be a pastor ready to co-operate.

Within local situations also, there is opening up new hope in church relationships. This involves the clergy and ministers in much time and prayer together. This is natural and right. In this formative period of church relations the Baptist minister must have time to play his full part in all that is going on.

Last, but by no means least, the minister in pastoral charge must have time for reading and preparation of sermons and preaching material. Often, it is the minister's reading time which is the first to go when pressures increase. This affects his preaching and his teaching in the congregation. Christians need to be built up in the faith. The most effective way is through a lively church fellowship under the care of a conscientious minister.

We need to recall the concept in Ephesians iv. 11. "And these were his gifts: some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for work in his service, to the building up of the body of Christ." The minister is to build up his people for the work of the ministry in the world. There is a constant responsibility upon the minister to seek to ensure that as his members live and work in the world, they do so as trained Christians. All too often the adult Christian appears to be making do with the faith he learned at Sunday School. The urgency for the teaching ministry arises not only from the challenge set before the

Christian by the questions the world asks—or, through apathy, fails to ask—but also from the confusion of voices within the Church itself, each, it seems, with its own particular emphasis and interpretation of the Faith. There is a real danger that church members may shut their ears to new truth because of the confusion aroused as they are whirled about by every fresh gust of teaching.

Although ministers do not always recognize it, most church members look to the minister for authoritative guidance in matters of the Faith. This means that the minister must be certain of what he believes. And this, in turn, means prayer, reading and study. It is very tempting for the minister to take up a dogmatic position on this or that point because it happens to be what he was first taught or what he finds easiest to defend, rather than keeping his mind open to the possibility that his point of view requires modification. Ministers are to expose themselves to each fresh gust of teaching so that they may discern which is the breeze of the Spirit.

The sort of issues upon which there must be constant study in these days are familiar to us. They include such questions as the authority of the Bible, the definition of the Faith and the behaviour of the Christian in the world. The consideration of the out-working of the Faith is particularly important as such matters as Sunday observance, sex, censorship, business ethics are forced into the public eye. Ministers cannot shirk their responsibility in thinking through such issues and of helping their membership to decide about them. This is time-consuming for the minister—but essential.

In addition, the minister requires time to consider, not only what he will teach but also the method he will employ in teaching. It may be that as Baptists we have not come sufficiently to terms with this question. The traditional mid-week meeting normally caters for only a small minority of the membership and often the very people who have most to learn are absent. The developing Family Church pattern certainly provides a further medium for teaching. But for obvious reasons the Sunday pattern is limited in its teaching time and opportunity and we must never lose sight of the vital need for proclamation of the Gospel on the Lord's Day. House groups of Christians for study are on the increase and are to be welcomed particularly as they represent a meeting point between the traditional understanding of the Church and the world in which it is set. But such groups require leaders and such leaders require training. It is the minister's responsibility to see that this is done. Almost certainly the minister will have to provide more and more written material for his people to study in their own homes and this again takes time. To build up the body of Christ for the work of the ministry is an essential and full-time task.

For these and other reasons we need to examine the present ministerial position from the point of view of finance and distribution amongst the churches.

Buildings

Statistics reveal that we have more than 2,000 church buildings. There must be a considerable number of them which house congregations which are without ministerial oversight—or a chance of it. There will be many other buildings which have ministerial oversight but which are no longer in strategic situations. The population movement has left them behind. The faithful few in these buildings struggle on, determined to keep going—sometimes for the sake of the past rather than of the future. Apart from the efforts involved, the question of the upkeep of such buildings is relevant, together with the amount of money tied up in them. It was surely not the intention of our forefathers that we should hold on to the premises they built for us beyond their useful life. It is true that reversionary trusts exist on many buildings which complicate sale. But when it is a matter of a company of people moving as a church to build on a new site, then the church continues and the reversionary trust need not come into operation, so that the proceeds of the sale can be used for the erection of the new premises. This matter of under-used and redundant buildings requires urgent examination.

We need, further, to be prepared to admit that in our own generation we have put some buildings in wrong places and initiated schemes which we should, perhaps, have never begun and certainly cannot finish. The result of these mistakes has been that churches struggle on in totally inadequate premises which sometimes break the spirits of ministers and the hearts of members. It is not un-Christian nor lacking in faith to admit errors of judgment. We must be prepared to cut our losses. Better to use sanctified common sense now, than to continue to put good money sacrificially given into unwise enterprises. This is not lack of faith but a reminder that God gives us common sense and expects us to use it.

Into the Future

Thus far we have tried frankly to analyse the existing situation. In doing so we have been critical—it may seem to some readers unnecessarily so. But it has been intentional. The present position needs to be put sharply. We are very prone to complacency. Because the writer believes that there is a serious situation which requires radical treatment he has written as he has. In the light of all that has been said, what are we to do? There should be a review initiated by the Baptist Union Council of the total denominational position with regard to the size and location of local churches and the dispersal of the ministry amongst them. This might be undertaken as a three-year plan in the following way.

Year 1

A denominational prayer call should be issued and put into the

hands of every minister and every church member. The first part could be a call to rededication to the Christian Faith. It would ask each person to come face to face with the Lord Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen. The second part could be a call to face the situation of the world as it really is—our world—with men and women needing the bread of life which the Church alone can give and with many of them needing food for their bodies which the Christian western world could help more to supply. The prayer call becomes thus a call to mission and service. The third part would have to raise the question of our own local church in this situation. There would need to be some such questions as: "Which do I care more about—the kingdom of God and its efficient and effective extension or the preservation and continuation of my local church? Am I prepared to accept the possibility of radical change for the sake of the kingdom?" Such questions can only be rightly put and answered in the context of rededication and the need of the world.

Year 2

A survey, based upon the Associations, should be undertaken of all the local churches. This would involve a consideration of their geographical position and the use made of the existing church buildings. It would mean the examination of probable population movements. It would require a careful assessment of the local ecumenical scene and a consideration of the plans and buildings of other denominations—particularly of the Congregationalists with whom Baptists have so many links in history and many of whom would like closer links with us now. It would demand a consideration of possible available sites in new locations. It would need to consider the reversionary trust of every church and the probable market value of *all* of them. There would be the necessity to keep constantly in mind the possibility of sensible, satisfactory and effective grouping of churches.

In such a survey it should be constantly emphasised that the size of the existing local church must not be the only criterion considered. Location and potential development must also be considered. The idea would *not* be to close all the small churches and retain all the large ones.

Year 3

This year would be spent in a careful assessment of the results of the survey. The overall denominational picture would have to be considered as well as the more local Association perspective. There should be conferences in each local church in the Association with a view to a mutual recognition of the leading of God as to what ought to be done in each locality. Out of this year should come decisions leading to plans for immediate action.

All this would involve the acceptance by each local church that

there are matters which require a viewpoint wider than that of the local church. In the end, of course, the decision about each church must rest with that church itself. But if the prayer call had been heeded the chances are that right decisions will be taken. If there are churches which refuse to co-operate, even in the survey, then the rest should go along—sadly—without them.

Conclusion

Of course the difficulties in the way of implementing such a scheme are considerable. There would be danger too. But there may well be a greater danger in doing nothing. In the work of Christ in these present days would it not be better to have, rather than the present situation, fewer Baptist churches, all with a ministry sufficiently supported to allow ministers to concentrate on the work of the pastoral ministry, all consisting of a fellowship strong enough to be able effectively to evangelize and serve in the community, all with premises adequate for the work in hand? The chances of a vigorous advance are the more likely in such a situation. And let us be clear about this; the purpose of such a radical reassessment is ultimately to strengthen. In a battle there comes a point—particularly after heavy losses—when a regrouping of the forces is essential together with a reallocation of officers. After such regrouping there becomes possible new advance and the turning of the tide of battle. The writer believes that to us as a denomination such a time has come now. We can be complacent no longer. What is required is the courage to face change for the sake of the future—and above all for the sake of the Gospel.

W. M. S. WEST

Summer School 1968

As part of its Diamond Jubilee celebrations the society is planning a summer school to be held at Spurgeon's College, London, from 20-24 June 1968. A varied programme is being planned which will be of interest to all those concerned with the study of Baptist history. The cost will be about £5. For further information and tentative bookings please apply to Rev. E. F. Clipsham, M.A., B.D., Baptist Church House, 4, Southampton Row, London W.C.1.