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Baptists and Ordination

A Comment upon *Church Relations in England*

IN the recent report of the Lambeth Conversations entitled *Church Relations in England*, the Archbishop of Canterbury is quoted as having said :

"The Report will inevitably deal with matters of great difficulty and delicacy; it will, I think, also raise some questions regarding the Church and Church relations which have not received much attention before and which certainly have not been thoroughly examined. It is to my mind of the first importance that the Report should have careful and dispassionate examination and that some of its issues should be thought out thoroughly, before any judgments upon it are made."

As the context shows, the Archbishop was speaking, in the first instance, to his own people. Yet the widespread interest which is being taken in this Report by Baptists indicates that many of them, too, are aware of the need to think afresh about the issues involved, and would welcome discussion upon them. Hence this paper. It does not pretend to be exhaustive in its treatment, nor does it presume to offer final conclusions. Its aim is rather to comment upon a limited section of the ground covered by the "Church Relations" Report with a view to promoting mutual enlightenment, and preparing the way for the decisions which will ultimately have to be taken.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has said that "it is round the theology of the ministry that the tensions most exist" (p. 6). The Report bears this out. Its findings are not recommendations. They set out the minimum conditions which the signatories believe would have to be satisfied before Intercommunion would be possible. These conditions really turn upon the Archbishop's suggestion that the Free Churches should "take episcopacy into their systems." As far as Baptists are concerned this phrase would appear to imply at least the following:—

1. The holding of a special service for the consecration of Baptist Bishops, at which certain Baptist ministers (whether General Superintendents or others) would be "consecrated" (i.e. given episcopal ordination) at the hands of Bishops of one or more of the historic episcopal churches, including at least one Anglican bishop. The effect of this "consecration" would be two-fold: (a) the new bishop would be "linked with the epis-

copate of the past"; (b) the new bishops, and all Baptist ministers thereafter ordained by them, would be acknowledged by the Church of England from the outset as "duly commissioned and authorised for the same offices in the Church of God as its own Bishops and Priests" (p. 44). It is of crucial importance that the meaning of this consecration service is deliberately left undefined.

2. Adoption by Baptists of episcopal ordination (by their own bishops) as being in future the rule of the denomination for the Baptist ministry (p. 44).

3. Agreement that "in present circumstances" and as "a transitional step" the following functions shall be assigned by Baptists to their bishops: (i) that of ordination; (ii) that of decision, in concurrence with presbyters and laity, in any suggested changes in matter of doctrine and polity; (iii) that of pastoral oversight of ministers and congregations (pp. 39f). (It will remain for later consideration whether "some form of Confirmation" should not also be reserved for episcopal administration.)

4. The holding for existing Baptist Ministers of "some form of further commissioning" (yet to be devised) such that it will not be considered by Baptists as "re-ordination," but will be "satisfactory to the Church of England as genuinely conveying the gifts and authority that have traditionally been associated with episcopal ordination" (pp. 40ff).

5. The Report admits finally "that the admission of women to the presbyterate, even if they were episcopally ordained, and the lay celebration of Holy Communion . . . would from the Anglican point of view gravely complicate, and perhaps prevent, interchange of ministries and the establishment of intercommunion" (p. 41).

To facilitate discussion of these conditions we will briefly sketch, first, our Baptist practice in Ordinations, and then its theological implications. (Note: The extracts quoted below have been chosen as broadly characteristic of Baptist thought. One or two quotations are added from other than Baptist sources in cases where Baptists would have agreed with the sentiments expressed.)

BAPTIST PRACTICE

Official guidance today is given in a statement adopted by the Baptist Union in 1923 and printed in the current *B.U. Handbook* (p. 33). It reads thus:—

ORDINATION AND RECOGNITION SERVICES.

1. Affirming the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the obligation resting upon them to fulfil their vocation according to the gift bestowed upon them:

By the *Ministry* we mean an office within the Church of Christ (not a sacerdotal order) conferred through the call of the Holy Spirit, and attested by a particular or local Church.

By *Ordination* we mean the act of the Church by which it delegates to a person ministerial functions which no man can properly take upon himself.

2. Inasmuch as the setting apart to the ministry is a matter deeply affecting the welfare of the Church:—

(i) An ordination should take place in the Church to which the person is called.

(ii) In order to witness to the unity of the Church and to safeguard the entrance into the ministry, it is desirable that the ordination should receive the concurrence and approval of the County Association or of its Committee.

(iii) In regard to anyone called to the exercise of the ministry in spheres other than that of the pastorate of a Church, ordination should take place in the presence of those by whom the person has been called.

(iv) It is recommended that the ordination or any subsequent induction service should include the observance of the Lord's Supper.

It will be observed that no effort is made in this statement to distinguish the pastoral office from other forms of ministry. This is in line with earlier Baptist practice whereby Deacons used to be ordained as well as Pastors. (The term preferred in the case of Missionaries was: "Designated.") For our present purpose, it will suffice to consider ordination to the pastorate.

Speaking generally the considerations set out above guide our Baptist practice today in this country. The conduct of Ordinations is not assigned by Baptists exclusively to any particular church-officer. It is generally entrusted by the church concerned to a senior minister of good standing who is held in regard by the ordinand and the church. Collegiate candidates for the ministry are normally ordained by their College Principal, who will frequently be assisted by other ministers. In other cases, the ordination will usually be conducted by a General Superintendent or other senior minister. The Order of Service varies, but it customarily includes a recapitulation of the church's invitation together with a statement of the candidate's personal faith in the form of answers to questions, or otherwise. Prayer is offered on his behalf, and this may or may not be accompanied by the Laying on of Hands, and/or the giving of the right hand of fellowship. In general, present practice seems tending to revert to earlier Baptist standards, and is giving to Ordination a greater significance and solemnity than was customary in the nineteenth century.

THEOLOGICAL BASIS

A full discussion here of the theological basis of Ordination as understood by Baptists is impossible, but the following points should be noted:

1. The Church is the Society of Christ and He is its only Head. It is a voluntary society in the sense, not that it is constituted by human wills, but that the Lord chose to establish His Church upon a believing man's free assent to His divine Kingship (*Matt. xvi. 18*). Of that free individual response to the call of Christ, Believers' Baptism is the abiding symbol and seal. As brethren in Christ all believers enjoy the same spiritual rights and privileges, although their functions in the Church vary according to the Will of Christ.

"The claim which each believer is, on the ground of his faith and of God's mercy, entitled to lay before the Church comprehends the equal fellowship of a brother in the society of his brethren. . . ." "He is equally eligible to every office as God shall give him time and ability to fill it." (Chas. Stovel: *Hints on the Regulation of Christian Churches*, 1835.)

2. Particular churches have both the right and the duty under Christ to order their own affairs without dictation from any. At the same time, as members of Christ they are under equal obligation to care for one another in the fellowship of the Spirit, and to work together for the perfecting of the whole Church according to the Mind of Christ.

"Though churches are so far independent of each other as that no one has a right to interfere in the concerns of another without their consent, unless it be as we all have a right to exhort and admonish one another, yet there is a common union required to subsist between them for the good of the whole; and so far as the ordination of a pastor affects this common or general interest it is fit that there should be a general concurrence in it." (Andrew Fuller: *On Ordination*, 1804.)

3. The Church was created to be both the object of the Divine love and the servant of the Divine will. She lives by the worship and service of God in Christ. That there should be church-officers appointed in order to enable her to fulfil this ministry is a divine ordinance which Baptists—in common with most other Christian Denominations—have always acknowledged. They recognise further that Scripture has attached special importance to specific classes of ministers (*Ephes. iv. 11f*). But Baptists have also felt it requisite at times to assert the priority of the Church, and thus to emphasize the truth that the Ministry ultimately derives its significance and sanctions from Christ through His Church, and is not to be regarded as set over against the Church with magisterial authority in its own right.

"To each of these churches thus gathered according to his (Christ's) mind declared in His Word, He hath given all that power and authority which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline which He hath instituted for them to observe . . . A particular church gathered and compleatly organised according to the mind of Christ consists of officers and members" . . . "And the

Officers appointed by Christ . . . are Bishops or Elders and Deacons." (Particular Baptist Confession, Article XXVI, 1677.)

"That there be some one or more in every particular church invested with official power is necessary and of divine appointment, for the due administration of the Word and Sacraments, the maintaining due order in the church and due execution of the laws of Christ" . . . "the ordinary officers of a church are (at least) bishops (sometimes called pastors and elders) and deacons." (Daniel Turner: *A Compendium of Social Religion*, 1778.)

"That though in respect of Christ the Church be one, yet it consisteth of divers particular congregations . . . every of which congregations though they be but two or three have Christ given them with all the means of salvation, are the Body of Christ and a whole Church. And therefore may and ought, when they are come together, to pray, prophesy, break bread and administer in all the holy ordinances, although as yet they have no officers, or that their officers should be in prison, sick or by any other means hindered from the Church." (Thos. Helwys: *A Declaration of Faith* . . . 1611.)

"We cannot agree that the ministry as commonly understood is essential to the existence of a true Christian Church, though we believe a ministry is necessary for its highest effectiveness." (Baptist Reply to Report on Lausanne Conference, 1927.)

4. Baptists recognise the historical and spiritual continuity of the Church, but they do not believe that this continuity resides in any special order of ministers, still less that it is dependent upon a physical act like the Imposition of Hands. In their view, it is grounded in the Living Christ, and is guaranteed by His Spirit's power to evoke from successive generations a believing response to Himself.

"As some official power and authority is of divine appointment to continue in the church till the whole be perfected; so there must of necessity be a succession of persons qualified for it, and invested with it. But *which* succession, as to what is essential to it, appears to me to depend entirely upon the presence of Christ, the gifts and graces of His Spirit and the force of His laws always continued in the church. . . . And therefore as to the popish notion of an uninterrupted *personal* formal conveyance of that power, from one officia to another, in succession from the apostles, it has no foundation as I can find in Scripture or the nature and reason of the constitution of a Christian church. . . ." (D. Turner, *op. cit.*)

5. A valid call to the ministry presupposes (i) personal experience by the candidate of divine leading (ii) confirmation by others—his church, the Association Committee, a College Council, etc. (iii) the free choice and invitation of a particular church to become its pastor.

"Though it is most true that the Holy Ghost makes men overseers of the Church and that gifts and graces are from Christ (which is His internal call) yet he ought to have an external call by the Church to ordain him to office. The inward call doth enable him to act in that station, the outward call doth enable him to act regularly." (H. Collins: *The Temple Repair'd*, 1702.)

6. In Ordination, a Baptist church, after testing the candidate's suitability, solemnly "separates" him in the name of Christ to the work of the pastorate.

"The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit into the office of Bishop (i.e. pastor) or Elder in a Church is that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the Church itself and solemnly set apart by Fasting and Prayer with imposition of hands of the Eldership of the Church if there be any before constituted therein." (Second London Confession, 1677.)

"To the public instating of him into his office it is necessary there should be a recognition and repetition both of the church's choice and call of him, and of his acceptance of it, for the confirmation thereof and for the satisfaction of ministers and churches in communion: who meet to see their order and to assist, especially the former, by prayer for them, and by giving a word of exhortation to them if desired." (John Gill: *A Body of Practical Divinity*, Vol. III, Bk. II, Ch. 3.)

7. In the Laying on of Hands, Baptist custom usually associates several ministers with the leader in the act. The practice has never been regarded as indispensable to the validity of the ordination, and it is frequently omitted. Nor, when it is practised, do Baptists conceive of it as imparting special spiritual power or grace to the ordinand. They have chiefly valued the custom because it is scriptural, and because, while clearly identifying the person who is being ordained, it affords occasion for invoking the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon him.

"The only end for which I join in an ordination is to unite with the elders of that and other churches in expressing my brotherly concurrence in the election, which, if it fell on what I accounted an unsound or unworthy character I should withhold." (Andrew Fuller, *op. cit.*)

Compare the words of John Owen, who was prepared to allow the laying-on of hands "provided that there be no apprehension of its being the sole authoritative conveyance of a successive flux of office-power which is destructive of the whole nature of the institution." (*The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government*, 1689.)

8. In ordination the Church gives to the ordinand the authority needful for his office. But it should be noted (a) that the church's part in this authorisation is confined to instating the ordinand in the office to which he has been designated by Christ, Who alone gives him all necessary power; and (b) that the authority committed to the ordinand is "ministerial" in its nature, i.e. its purpose is not to lay down laws for the church, but to assist the church to execute the laws of Christ.

"Though the pastor be named and chosen for this office by the people, yet his commission and power to administer all divine ordinances is not derived from the people, for they had not this power in themselves, but it proceeds from our Lord Jesus Christ who is the only King of his Church and the principal of all power; and he has appointed in his Word that the call of his Church and solemn ordination shall be

the means whereby his ministers are invested with this authority." Letter of Isaac Watts to Mark Lane Church, 1702.)

"Thus in a gospel church rightly constituted there is no room for the most detestable of all tyranny namely, the arbitrary exercise of ecclesiastical power . . . ; and yet that there is a governing authority and ruling power entrusted with and invested in the proper officers of a church is evident to me from the scriptures here quoted and many others, though that power is strongly limited by the laws of Christ and appears to be directory, declarative and executive only, and not legislative or properly coercive." (D. Turner, *op. cit.*)

9. Baptists have always agreed that it is the function of the pastor to administer the ordinances. They have not agreed on the question whether it is *exclusively* his function so to do. In contrast to general 17th and 18th century practice, the more recent tendency has been to recognise the right of laymen to administer the sacraments if authorised by the church concerned.

"For when the Church chooseth the minister, doth not the Church in effect say: 'We give thee, A.B., powre to administer the Word, seales of the Covenant, and censures in the behalf of the whole Church?'; and the Minister-elect doth then actually possess and assume that powre delegated unto him by the Church." (John Smyth: *Paralleles, Censures, Observations*, 1609.)

"These holy appointments (i.e. Baptism and the Lord's Supper) are to be administered by those only who are qualified and thereunto called according to the commission of Christ." (Second London Confession, 1677.)

"It is the Church which preaches the Word and celebrates the sacrament. . . 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. . . ." (*The Doctrine of the Church*, Statement by B.U. Council, 1948.)

CONCLUSION

From this short survey two important facts emerge. First, there is such a thing as a Baptist tradition in the ordering of the life of our churches. Its pattern is both distinct and persistent, while yet flexible enough to admit of minor variations. That it is not more generally recognised is partly because we have not always been as faithful to it ourselves as we might have been, and partly because the tradition is essentially one of spiritual freedom, and is apt to exert most influence when its presence is least apparent. Be that as it may, we Baptists have a definite Church-Order. Our fathers did not abandon episcopal government in the interests of self-willed individualism. They rejected it consciously in favour of a different type of Church government which was intended to give fuller scope to the authority of the Holy Spirit in the Church's affairs. Three hundred years of history have done nothing to discredit their conviction that this was God's will

for His people. They have rather confirmed it by the blessings with which God has honoured it.

Secondly, Baptist Church-Order is the fruit of a conception of the Church and the Ministry which is rooted in the New Testament. We do not regard the Church as an hierarchical institution subject to Parliament and Canon law, but as a spiritual society ruled by Christ, and relying for its final sanctions upon His Holy Spirit alone. Of this Church, Ministers are the divinely-chosen pastors and teachers. But they find their appointed tasks through the free decision of those whom they lead, and they exercise their gifts not as members of a special class, but as servants of Christ for the building up of His Church and the advance of His Kingdom (*Ephes. iv. 11f*). These convictions are fundamental to our understanding of the Christian faith. For us, therefore, no less than for Anglo-Catholics, the problem presented by this Report is ultimately a theological one. These suggestions, if acted upon, would require of Baptists not merely that we should "take episcopacy into our system"—for that matter, we have *episcopus* in our system already—but that we should introduce into our system a particular kind of episcopacy. The question before us is whether this would be consistent with the fundamental religious principles upon which our polity is based. If it is not, then no particular prescience is needed to see that the experiment could not succeed. It would be like performing a blood-transfusion with blood from the wrong group. This conclusion may be the one to which we shall eventually be driven. But meanwhile it is very important that the points at issue should be made as plain as possible to all concerned.

We therefore suggest that our Anglican brethren should be invited to state the precise grounds upon which Baptists are asked to accept episcopal ordination as a condition of inter-communion. In other words, the question of authority must be faced. The signatories to this Report virtually recognise this when they declare: "Episcopacy cannot be offered to or accepted by the Free Churches as a mere matter of expediency or in a completely undefined form" (p. 38). Unfortunately they do nothing to implement this statement, but simply say: "It is assumed that the Free Church and the Church of England would accord to each other the same liberty of interpretation of the nature of Episcopacy and of priesthood as obtains in the Church of England" (p. 44). This may be as far, in the circumstances, as it was possible for them to go. But it plainly falls far short of what is necessary, and we are entitled to seek for further elucidation.

Finally, one would express the hope that (if this has not already been done by the time this paper appears) the existing Baptist Union Committee on the Ministry, or some similar body

set up for the purpose, should be asked to prepare a careful theological report upon the Baptist conception of the Ministry. The subject received some attention in the Statement on *The Doctrine of the Church* which the Baptist Union published in 1948, but the treatment given to it then was very slight. Many aspects have necessarily been omitted from this present paper, and there is great need now for an adequate statement dealing with the major issues that are involved in these discussions.

R. L. CHILD.

Man is not alone: A Philosophy of Religion, by A. J. Heschel. (Farrar, Straus and Young Inc. \$3.75).

This is an unusual book—"a philosophy of religion formulated by one of the best minds of contemporary Judaism." In Part I, on the problem of knowing God, the writer starts from "the sense of the ineffable" as the basis of his answer. Speculative arguments for the existence of God are dismissed. There is no attempt at a psychological analysis of religious experience, but rather a systematic description intended to carry conviction at each step. We must start, says the writer, not from the question of God's existence or from the idea of His essence, but from the awareness of His presence.

Part II, on the problem of living, begins with a description of man's needs—in particular, "the need to be needed"—and leads up to a demonstration of the way in which Jewish religion—defined as "the awareness of God's interest in man"—satisfies them.

Christians whose interest in Judaism is often limited to the years before Christ, will find it interesting and sometimes inspiring, to read an exposition of the philosophy underlying Judaism against the background of the modern world, though many will feel, too, that this approach to religion is too isolated from ordinary experience. Much of the book may well be described as poetry rather than philosophy—faith is "a blush in the presence of God" and time is "eternity formed into tassels." But it is poetry inspired by the same religious outlook as much of the Old Testament, and gives a fresh and striking account of religious experiences and aspirations which we claim our Lord came not to destroy, but to fulfil.

G. ELWIN SHACKLETON.