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The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

The Journal of the Baptist Historical Society

VOLUME XXI

OCTOBER 1966

No. 8

Training Baptist Ministers

THE Puritan tradition which did so much to mould many of the forms of English preaching was founded on the belief that the preaching ministry was so great and holy that those who were called to exercise it needed the best training that could be offered them. It is one of the presuppositions of the *Directory of Public Worship*. All pastors must have an adequate education and should have those skills in ancient languages which alone can unlock the door to the truths of the Scriptures. They should be trained also "in such arts and sciences as are handmarks unto divinity". This principle played a vital part in the growth of Free Church ministerial education for there are few branches of learning which are completely exempt from such a definition. It is recognised that it is possible that such studies could have a merely academic quality and consequently be a temptation for the preacher who would display his learning rather than lead the sinner to Christ, so it is stressed that all theological studies must always be related to the needs of the ordinary believer. The Puritan was always suspicious of theological learning for its own sake. The Scriptures and the doctrines of the church are, for him, the most practical of all branches of education. By them a man learns the way of life and death. They teach the way to the Saviour in whom alone salvation is found. John Preston talks of educating human pride, in his

Treatises on Modification and Humiliation (1635). He pleaded with preachers to subdue the merely human element in their sermons that the glory of Christ might shine through. Yet he is equally intolerant of those who claim that preachers need no training or that their education should be limited to branches of Divinity. The whole scope of knowledge is profitable for the servant of the Lord, who must allow no prejudice to hinder him in his search for it. The children of Israel, he says, whetted their scythes on the stones of the Philistines, and a preacher must sharpen the cutting edge of his faculties with the studies of the Arts, but in this he makes the typically Puritan plea that all shall be done for the glory of God, and not for the preacher's honour. He must so accept his training that he will preach the "plain gospel" not the fancies of "rhetoricous or philosophous." "A shepherd feeds his sheep with hay, not to produce hay, but lambs and wool". A preacher studies this world's knowledge to produce not earthly rewards, but the good purpose of God.

It has to be acknowledged that the first Baptists did not regard theological training as an essential factor in their ministry. The church founded by Smyth shows in its first three leaders the variety of men who could undertake the pastoral office. John Smyth himself was a Cambridge man, trained at Christ's College of which he later became a Fellow. Cambridge was at that time one of the centres of Puritan thought. His path to the ministry was one common to the great majority of leading reformers. Thomas Helwys was also an educated man, but he had sought his learning at Gray's Inn which was not then confined to legal studies but embraced other fields of knowledge also. Thus, though trained, he had not received a theological education. John Murton, who followed Helwys as pastor of the first Baptist church, differs again. Little is known of him save that while he was in Amsterdam he worked as a furrier.

The seventeenth century poured great scorn upon untrained preachers. One of the broadsides of the period bears the title *The Tradesmen are Preachers in and about the City of London* and has as its sub-title *A Discovery of the most dangerous and damnable tenets that have been spread with this few years by many erroneous heretical and mechanic spirits*. This well represents the attitude of the majority of Churchmen, including the Puritans. Preaching pre-supposed an ordination and this, for Puritans, followed a period of training. The early Baptists, however, denied that the right to preach was tied to an office or that the ministry had to receive the commendation of an hierarchy or any specific form of education. William Kiffin describes himself as one who "takes upon me to preach, having never been at the universities, nor received orders from the bishops". He gives this description of himself in

a sermon on Hosea 11 : 7-8, preached at the house of a friend who had broken his leg. It was on such grounds that he was committed by Sir Thomas Mallat, a judge of the Assize to the White Lion. Samuel How could claim that "humane learning would never make a man a minister of the Gospel". These views do not, however, indicate a suspicion of education on the part of the first Baptists, but rather their fear that human forms and ordinances, as applied in the established church would interfere with the operation of the Holy Spirit who alone could be effective in calling men to His service.

Many Baptists of the period had, like Smyth, received a university education. Hanserd Knollys was another Cambridge man who left the university to become master of Gainsborough Free School. Henry Denne also graduated at Cambridge before his ordination by the bishop of St. Davids. The two great Baptist preachers of Wales during these early years went to Oxford. Vavasor Powell was a Jesus man and John Myles was at Brasenose. The Welsh foundation at Oxford, which probably accounts for John Penny's transference there from Cambridge, gives us the reason for this relationship. Apart from this background of university education, the attitude of the early Baptists towards the Bible itself made them concerned with the education of the ministry. They constantly sought to get behind the words of the English translation to the very words of the original. Yet academic learning was not recognised as a necessary prerequisite for a call to the ministry. "Some of those who preach among us" says the 1644 Confession, "are esteemed, as the Apostles were, to be unlearned and ignorant men. Apollos was instructed more perfectly in the way of God by Aquilla, a tradesman and Priscilla his wife; but the Scripture saith 'As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God' ". Benjamin Cox says two years later that only two qualifications were necessary for a preacher, gifts and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Yet it was acknowledged that every preacher had to labour that his gifts should be perfected, especially in his study of the Bible, its language and its truths.

The exclusion of Nonconformists from the universities after the Restoration threatened to rob the Free Churches of their educated leaders. This drove them all to consider the development of academies to undertake the work. As early as 1675 when the Nonconformists gained a temporary rest from persecution the Particular Baptist ministers of London sent out to churches in England and Wales a letter inviting their delegates to assemble in London to seek ways for "providing an orderly standing ministry in the church who might give themselves to reading and study and so become able ministers of the New Testament". It was not until

1689 that something was done to achieve this purpose. In September of that year a General Assembly met in the metropolis and viewed with alarm the state of the ministry. The messenger and ministers therefore decided to establish a fund and among its objects was, "To assist those members that shall be found in any of the aforesaid (Particular Baptist) churches that are disposed to study, have an inviting gift, and are sound in fundamentals, in attaining to the knowledge and understanding of the languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew". This indicates both the concern the Particular Baptists had for an educated ministry, and also the purpose of such training; it was to help the preacher to understand the very Word of God so that he could truly comment it to his congregation.

It was not until the beginning of the following century that the General Baptists exhibited such a concern. In June 1702 at the General Association at White's Alley, London, it was proposed, "as a matter very convenient and necessary for the propagation of the Gospel in general and the general faith more particularly, that there be a School of universal learning erected in or about this city in order to bring up persons (who by the grace of God shall be soberly inclined) to the work of the ministry: It is now unanimously resolved by this Association that we will, to the utmost of our powers endeavour to set up and maintain such a school". Five persons were set aside to seek subscriptions and to bring a report later. The idea however, came to nothing. In 1724 the Circular Letter of the Association pointed out the continuing need for a well trained ministry and urged the ministers in their local congregations to "set up private meetings that those amongst them who are most likely, may have thereby the better opportunity to discover and improve their several capacities". "Moreover" the letter adds, "we advise that all prudence be used by you, the several ministers, not only to encourage but to instruct the young and best knowing in ministerial work".

Among the General Baptists the training of the ministry was left largely in the hands of enterprising individuals, and not until the closing years of the century did the whole body become involved in this work. The Particular Baptists too were in the debt of devoted individuals in spite of the encouragement and support given by the Fund. They refused to acknowledge the necessity of an educated ministry, even while stressing the benefits it would confer, and at Bristol in 1693 they laid down that the knowledge of the ancient languages was not an absolute prerequisite for a minister. They feared that such a viewpoint would interfere with their belief that the Holy Spirit is sovereign in calling and commissioning men for the ministry. It is to Edward Terrill, that the Particular Baptists were especially indebted for laying the foundations of a

work that would produce for them an able and well trained ministry. His bequest in 1679 enabled a pastor at Broadmead to devote three half-days a week for the instruction of ministerial candidates. The emphasis is still laid upon the languages of the original Scriptures for he lays down that the pastor-tutor shall be skilled in Greek and Hebrew. This arrangement was typical of the period. Several ministers of the Free Churches also gathered small groups of potential ministers to their own houses in a similar way and out of these efforts grew the famous Nonconformist academies of the eighteenth century that were to make such a contribution, not only to the English pulpit but also to the development of new methods of teaching.

Though some Baptists in the eighteenth century became increasingly suspicious of any emphasis upon ministerial education, the outstanding ministers commended all efforts to improve the educational standards of the ministry. The learned Dr. Gill said that "humane learning" was "useful". The word is significant for he wished to maintain the earlier emphasis that it was not of the essence of ministry. His particular concern was that which we have seen to underlie the earlier Baptist efforts, that ministers should have some acquaintance with Greek and Hebrew, so that they could read the Bible in the original languages. However he also commended an educated ministry so that preachers of the Gospel might understand the writings of the outstanding men of learning and "know the use of words and the propriety of speech". He adds, "Such who are called to the work of the ministry, who have not had a liberal education, and yet have time and leisure, are not easily to be excused, if they do not make use of their time and those means that may be had to improve themselves in useful knowledge". This adds to the older concern for understanding the Scriptures, the characteristic emphasis of the eighteenth century academies, which taught many branches of knowledge and in particular laid a new stress on science and modern languages.

The hyper-Calvinists, however, who followed Gill often tended to become more and more suspicious of the educational developments within the Baptist denomination. This rested on differing views of the purpose of ministerial training. Should the basic training be given within the area of known revealed truth or should independence of theological speculation be encouraged?

Even Robert Robinson of Cambridge was suspicious of the tyranny that learning could exercise when married to an unyielding orthodoxy. "Languages, mathematics, knowledge of belles lettres, and all parts of a learned and polite education render a man great and respectable in all cases," he writes, "except in that of inferring that these acquirements give him a right to dictate in matters of conscience. It is a question with some of great name whether the

Christian religion have received most good or harm from learned men, and they incline to the latter, and urge in proof the vexatious disputes, which hard words, pretended mysteries, metaphysical distinctions and scholastic definitions, in the name of orthodoxy, have introduced among good men." These two attitudes represent the tension which lies behind the growth of the Bristol academy and the formation of the new colleges at the beginning of the nineteenth century, especially as they became associated among the Particular Baptists with the break-down of hyper-Calvinist theology.

The Evangelical awakening and the rise of Fullerism gave ministerial education a great impetus. It became increasingly obvious that the hope for Christian expansion lay in a well-trained dedicated ministry which would devote its God-given gifts to the evangelization of the whole world. There were still, however, problems to confront the educationalists, and the main one was to maintain the central significance, in all ministerial work, of the divine vocation. Andrew Fuller in his address to the students at Stepney on 24th June, 1813, said that, ideally, he would like to see men admitted into the academies for studies in languages and science in their early youth and would be prepared to recommend this if he were able to presuppose the faith of Christ and the gifts suited to the ministry would accompany such work. This however, he admits cannot be assumed and, he adds, "our dread of an unconverted ministry makes us require religion as the first qualification. Only pursue learning that you may be better able to serve the Lord, and all will be well". This attitude dominates the leaders of the academies. They all desire to do no other than "improve the gifts of pious young men designed for the ministry". William Steadman, the first president of the Northern Academy, drew attention in an address given in 1826 to the prejudice which had existed in the eighteenth century and which still persisted, in some measure, to that time, against all academic institutions for ministerial training. They had been thought by many to interfere with the sovereignty of God whose work alone it is to call men to His service, and to introduce into the ministry such persons whose qualifications are merely human. That this was a common problem is seen also in the reference that S. A. Swaine makes in his history of Bristol College, when he notes how the Western Association in 1707 had to deal with a question raised by the Bridgwater church, "Whether it be not a dishonour to the Holy Ghost to raise up a ministry of human learning or to send them to school, who have the gifts to preach the Gospel". Steadman recognises that it would be wrong to pour contempt on such views for the error of those who hold them springs merely from a "misapplied principle". The answer lies not in any argument or doctrinal dispute, he claims, important though these things may be, but in demonstrating that the academies

would not patronise any but those whom Christ Himself had made His ministers.

The motive which inspired the early advocates of the academies was essentially evangelical and missionary. Isaac Mann, in a sermon at the Northern Academy in 1829, pointed to the decayed state of many Baptist churches and claimed that the ministers themselves had to accept a large share of the blame for this state of affairs. Through ignorance and lack of insight they had failed to understand the nature of the age to which they preached. Only a man grounded in the best thought and ideas of the period could make the Gospel relevant to his contemporaries. "We have not aimed," he says, "at eminence in our profession. We have not laboured, as we ought, to carry onward the minds of our hearers with the requirements of the times. The ministry which 50 years ago succeeded in our denomination must fail. If our minds are not well cultivated, our hearers must throw away from us to a more enlightened ministry. The children of our congregations are receiving an education far superior to anything formerly known and we must meet them in increased knowledge and sound wisdom or we shall not meet them at all." This concern was echoed by many Baptist leaders in the nineteenth century. John Aldris makes this same point in 1845 when he doubted whether the popular efficiency of the Baptist ministry had kept pace with the advancement in secular learning and literary refinement. At the same time he makes a plea that learning should go hand in hand with simplicity. It was because some men, as the result of a little learning, had been inclined to shrink from a pointed style and homely illustration that it was often the untrained minister who became the most successful pastor and preacher, for the majority of Baptist congregations still were composed of the poor and often illiterate classes: He adds, "A minister cannot have too much learning but he may have too little grace".

The relationship of the growth of Baptist academies with the Evangelical Revival becomes obvious when one notes the dates of the various enterprises. It was in 1770 that the work of Edward Terrill was crowned by the formation of the Bristol Education Society. It is worthy of note that this was the year when Dan Taylor and others called into being the New Connexion of the General Baptists, a movement so indebted to the Methodist Revival. The foundation of a Baptist academy in London was laid in 1752 with the formation of the London Baptist Educational Society of which Thomas Llewellyn was tutor. It is again interesting to note that it was at the prompting of Llewellyn that a mission to North Wales was inspired. The work of this society decayed, but in 1810 was revived when the Stepney academy came into being. In the North John Fawcett conducted his own private school for twenty

years before joining with others in the establishment of the Horton Academy in 1804. These years were the time of the great missionary awakening among Baptists. In 1805 William Steadman began work at Bradford where he taught candidates for the ministry in addition to his pastoral duties. His zeal was one of the major factors in the foundation of the Society for Itinerant Preachers. In Wales some attempts had been made to provide an educated ministry in the first half of the eighteenth century. Towards the end of the fourth decade John Griffiths of Hengoed gathered a few students for training, at Trosnant near Pontypool, a work which lasted about until 1770. These were the years of Awakening in the Principality. In 1741 the Association at Blaunau Gwent had discussed the possibility of a denominational college but the resources of Baptists at that time were considered inadequate. It was in 1806, under the inspiration of Micah Thomas, that a work was begun at Abergavenny which has continued ever since and is now comprehended in the South Wales Baptist College. It is noteworthy that Thomas was largely under the influence of Andrew Fuller and the academy he led was modelled on his old college at Bristol. It was the evangelical spirit of the second half of the eighteenth century which convinced Baptists to the need of ministerial education and they sought to produce a preaching ministry able to capture the imagination of the age.

The General Baptists lagged behind their Particular brethren in training their candidates for the ministry. In 1794 the Assembly, noted that the number of candidates offering themselves was insufficient for the needs of the churches and a fund was established "for the defraying the expenses of the instruction of young men of ability". The first student, Benjamin Austen of Smarden, was placed in the charge of Rev. Stephen Freeman and a second, of Rev. John Evans. The atmosphere of the times is well represented in the statement of the Assembly of 1807 which says, "So fully apprised are our Calvinistic Brethren of the utility of learning to Christian Ministers that, not contented with flourishing Academies, they are now establishing a Grammar School by way of preparation for the Academy. This should incite us to greater zeal and activity in the important business of education for the Christian Ministry, persuaded that our cause is the best of causes and it ought not to want those efforts on our part which, when properly directed, will ensure its wide and lasting diffusion throughout the World". Ministerial education was thus allied with the evangelical fervour of the age and played a most important part in preparing for the great advances of the nineteenth Nonconformists.

The techniques of preaching and pastoral work were not the prime concern of the academies and their contribution in these fields were incidental rather than essential. The curriculum was

essentially academic, aimed at giving the student an acquaintance with the body of knowledge which would be of service to him in understanding the Christian faith and preparing his mind so that he could benefit by theological books that were becoming increasingly available, but presupposing that he had gifts already which would accommodate themselves to the practical needs of his ministry. The circular concerning the establishment of the Bristol Education Society says, "if a man be not truly religious, and furnished with talents adapted to the work of the ministry, let him have as much learning as may be, it cannot be expected that he should be an acceptable and useful minister". This same letter specifies areas in which a preacher should exhibit competence. He should be able to read the Scriptures in the languages in which they are written so that he may understand the genuine spirit and meaning of the writers. He should be trained in natural philosophy, science, by which his "ideas of the Divine perfections and the work of God may be enlarged and elevated" and should be "led through such a course of instruction as hath a natural tendency, with the blessing of God, to enable him to exercise his ministerial talents with more general acceptance and usefulness". The course commended at that time comprised, English, Greek and Hebrew; Logic, Geography, Astronomy and Natural Philosophy in general; Moral Philosophy, the Evidence of Christianity, Jewish Antiquities, Chronology, Ecclesiastical History and Systematic Divinity. The one practical discipline which is included in the course is Oratory, the purpose of which was, "to acquaint them (the students) with the various powers of language and pronunciation, and to enable them to express their thoughts in the most suitable language, and to deliver them in the most striking and acceptable manner". The matter taught in the colleges may have changed considerably since that time, but there has been comparatively little change in the general structures of the course in British Baptist colleges, though the concern for Natural Philosophy largely disappeared after the mid-nineteenth century. The presupposition remains that the colleges train a man's mind rather than offer a methodology to meet the ecclesiastical situation of the day. Compared with the time devoted to the study of languages, history and theology, the attention to homiletics, pastoralia and other applied subjects is small.

In modern times this presupposition has been challenged particularly by the example of some American seminaries, where courses on the practical discipline of church life have assumed major proportions and professional staff appointed to undertake them. The beginnings of theological education in America were similar to those in Britain to whom the Baptists of the New World were greatly indebted. In the mid-eighteenth century the Baptists of Rhode Island realised that the outreach they desired could only

be achieved by a well ordered educational system. The inspiration in this advance came from Morgan Edwards, at that time minister of the Church at Philadelphia, who had received his initial training at the little Trosnant Academy and at Bristol. The first president, James Manning, took up his appointment in 1765 and four years later seven men took the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In 1770 the college, later known as Brown University, moved to Providence, and the Quakers, Congregationalists and Episcopalians joined in its administration. Thus, from the outset the pattern of higher education in general and, associated with it, theological education, took a different path from Britain. Out of these beginnings came a number of universities and theological seminaries, some of the later retaining the British pattern but others becoming large institutions making the growth of specialised courses possible. The differences in the natures of the American and British University system have been a major factor in the differences in approach to ministerial preparation, in that, as literary and theological education developed side by side, a greater diversity of courses have evolved. In a similar way courses in the techniques of preaching and church administration became subjects of Christian Education as theological and methodological study.

In Britain, throughout the years the main method of teaching homiletics has been the sermon class, supplemented by some lectures on rhetoric, given normally by the Principal. The purpose of the sermon class was defined by Micah Thomas of Pontypool, "To furnish an opportunity for detecting false grammar, promoting a natural and just arrangement and pointing out any erroneous construction that may be laid on divine truth". The problem at Aber-gavenny was a peculiar one, for few students who entered there had any knowledge of the English language for the first purpose of this academy was to teach English to Welsh preachers, so that they could serve those parts of the Principality, mainly English speaking, which were almost devoid of an evangelical ministry. The approach to homiletics however was the same as in the other colleges. At Bristol, about the same time, each student took his turn to read an essay or sermon in the lecture room, for subsequent criticism. This exercise fell to each man about four times a session. Each month the juniors prepared sermon sketches for the criticism of the tutors, and every two months the seniors prepared full sermon drafts, which received similar treatment. There have been many who have felt that such help that was given to future preachers was hopelessly inadequate, especially in view of the infrequency of a student's opportunity to preach before the class.

From time to time the college would give some instruction to a student on the art of elocution. An anonymous minister, writing to the *Baptist Magazine* in 1877 notes that at his college the amount

of instruction in the art of public speaking was "confined mainly to a few exhibitions of elocution by a third-class professor of the art, who in a comic vein, ridiculed the salient defects of some supposed fabulous speakers and ended his prelections with a recitation of 'Satan's address to the Sun' or some other heroic piece in which the passion was torn to tatters". In the final year, he tells us, "We were sent once a fortnight to a professor of elocution residing in the West End of London. He was a retired actor having 'trod the boards' with Miss O'Neill and other theatrical celebrities . . . Our teacher was certainly a gentleman and fully able to instruct us ; but as Dissenters were probably an unknown quantity to him, he always spoke to us as if we were incipient clergymen ; the details of his instructions therefore, not being very appropriate. For example he gave us directions as to the right delivery of certain portions of the Daily Service of the Church, told us not to assume unnatural gravity in walking from the vestry to the desk, from the desk to the lectern and from the lectern to the altar. He even hinted at the right way of unfolding our handkerchief before the sermon began". There are many at present in the Baptist ministry whose recollections of elocution lessons are not dissimilar. British colleges have always found great difficulty in finding teachers who could adequately instruct the students in the techniques of good delivery. They have been slow to recognise that elocution and sermon delivery are by no means synonymous. Few students need to be taught how to declaim a given passage, but even fewer know how to use their voices and give to their own material the natural emphasis that will captivate a congregation.

In spite of criticism that can be levelled against them, usually accounted for by lack of proper resources, the Baptist colleges of the nineteenth century were remarkably effective. *The Times* in 1877 pointed to the superiority of the training received by Dissenting ministers, to that given to candidates for the ministry of the established church. One factor in this was the intimate relationship between the college and the local churches. The gifts and call of a candidate were tested by his own church before he was allowed to proceed further. The student began his course of training having already received the criticisms of the pastor and members of his own and other churches. In 1810, in a comment on the work of the Stepney Academy, the *Baptist Magazine* stressed that its work could only be fruitful if the churches fulfilled their duties to the men whom God called to His ministry. The pastor must sympathise with them and must examine them frequently in all that relates to faith, hope and love. He will instruct them in the ways of self-examination and prayer, relating to them his own experiences that they may benefit thereby. "The Pastor, being satisfied himself, will inform the church, that such and such brethren have a desire to be

employed in the vineyard of Christ. The Church will then, probably, request the young men to relate their experiences freely, with respect to this concern, stating circumstantially the rise and progress they profess to feel. If this statement be satisfactory, what then, you will say, has the church to do further in the business? I answer says the writer, "the church will not say 'You *shall* be preachers' for that might seem to invade the rights of conscience nor, on the contrary, 'You shall *not* be preachers' for that would seem to invade the prerogative of the great King of Zion. The church will request them to speak repeatedly—hear them patiently and affectionately, judge with candour, and encourage or discourage, in the fear of God in weight and measure. Young men who see that their seniors are serious and earnest in this matter will be more likely to be so themselves". Before the end of the century some colleges were not satisfied to accept a candidate until, not only his own church, but also the Association of Churches had set its seal upon him.

As the student had already demonstrated his potentialities before entering the academy, he was often used during his course as a "village preacher". Thus he gained preaching experience and the smaller churches received a pulpit ministry. The extent to which a student should be committed to such work has become a problem in those areas where there are great numbers of pastorless churches. Too much student-preaching, without adequate supervision, or opportunity to hear experienced men in their own pulpits merely confirms a student in the habits of a bad delivery; too few opportunities on the other hand, robs him of experience in that work upon which much of his ministry will depend.

When university education became available for Dissenters there were many who feared its effects upon ministerial training. This attitude sprung from two anxieties; the first, that the new learning of the nineteenth century would corrupt the theological orthodoxy of students and also that academic training of this nature would become a primary requisite for the ministry and the practical discipline would be neglected. The educational leaders of the denomination rejected both. Speaking at a conference of students and old students of Rawden in 1892 James Walker of Frome ended his address by saying, "Degree work has only been allowed when it did not interfere with the studies which were deemed essential to men who looked forward to becoming preachers and pastors. The college aims at developing the preaching power of its men. The Free Churches will lose ground if ever they forfeit that power. The preacher is in requisition. The *Speaking man* will always vindicate his speech, not so much by his rhetoric as by the way he grasps great moral principles and shows their application to the many sided life of man today".

(Concluded on p. 363)