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The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

THE JOURNAL OF THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXXII

APRIL 1988

No. 6

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ON LIVING WITH CONTROVERSY

The Bishop of Manchester, the Rt Revd Stanley Booth-Clibborn, in the current issue of his diocesan magazine, *Crux*, invites members of the Church of England not to fear controversy, for, 'It is through the clash of opinions and reasoned argument that God's spirit can work... This has been true from the very earliest days of the church. I suppose few of us would be Christians today if Paul under God's leading had not withstood Peter to his face and told him he was wrong over the admission of Gentiles'. At the same time the bishop argues that controversy and criticism need to be pursued in a spirit of love.⁽¹⁾ Doubtless the context of such remarks was the Anglican Synod's debate on the recent Crockford's *Preface*. But the injunction comes as timely to Baptists as we celebrate - if that is the right word - the one hundredth anniversary of the Downgrade Controversy. The painfulness of that episode to all concerned cannot be doubted, though, equally, there needs to be a measure of thankfulness to God that it did not lead to a wider schism within the denomination. Baptists in Britain appear, if ever attracted by the 'downgrade', to have held back from moving in that direction, so that they have been seen by recent historians as amongst the most theologically conservative of the Free Churches, providing an important bridge between Ecumenical Christianity and the world of Evangelicalism.⁽²⁾

If the 'Downgrade' then represents unfulfilled prophecy, the shadow of the Controversy has been cast over British Baptist history in the twentieth century. Indeed, so sensitive was the issue that in 1915, more than a quarter of a century after the event, the Assembly of the Baptist Union when invited to expunge the minute of 23rd April 1888, which was critical of Spurgeon, declined to reopen the question but did agree to share Dr Carlile's hope that the Council would seek 'some means by which English Baptists now separated may be united in one organisation'.(3)

In 1931, 'Downgrade' again cast its shadow over the Union when T. R. Glover produced a study outline on *Fundamentals* for the Discipleship Campaign Committee of the Baptist Union: the order and table of contents of the manual were orthodox enough - Sin, Punishment, Repentance, Conversion, Salvation, Atonement, Justification and Sanctification, and, of course, the purpose was evangelistic. Glover had, in fact, just returned from the B.W.A. Meetings in Toronto, where, though under attack from T. T. Shields and the Canadian fundamentalists, he had won support from the *Toronto Star* in these terms: 'Famous scholar though he is, he is yet not afraid of the word "converted", a word almost now stricken from the terminology of educated religious people'. But Glover's work at home ran into difficulties for failing to uphold the traditional language of substitutionary atonement; ever impatient with theory as over against experience, Glover, whose theology was essentially 'personalist',(4) gently suggested that the traditional language owed more to the Old Testament and Roman Law than to the Gospel. Elsewhere he had suggested that Christ's death was to change our attitude to God, not God's attitude to us, which provoked protest from the Revd Thomas Greenwood, a Spurgeon's-trained minister of a Liverpool Church, who challenged the way in which Glover handled the Atonement, arguing that he was not initiating controversy but responding to an attack. Such a move was encouraged by Tydeman Chilvers, who in 1919 had become pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle after a Strict Baptist Pastorate in Ipswich. In 1921 he expressed himself critical of Fullerton's biography of Spurgeon, regretting that he did not write 'boldly in advocacy of Mr Spurgeon's attitude' in the Downgrade. Heated discussion ensued in the pages of *The Baptist Times* and *The Sword and Trowel*, which prompted the officers of the Union to wonder whether they were in for a second 'Downgrade' before the breaches of the earlier controversy were fully healed. Glover even threatened to leave the Union, if action were taken against his book which became the subject of a motion at the Council in March 1932, when Greenwood was supported by another Spurgeon's-trained minister, the Revd W. T. Soper. During an adjournment, however, a compromise was achieved, largely through the mediation of Dr Percy Evans, the then Principal of Spurgeon's College, whereby it was agreed that a pamphlet be distributed which would uphold the traditional substitutionary view of the Atonement, thus enabling Greenwood and Soper to withdraw their motion. Glover argued that he had no intention of attacking other people's dearly-held views; he recognised 'that his representation of Christ's sacrifice was inadequate and incomplete' but he knew of no representation that was adequate and complete, for the mystery of the cross was beyond all such exposition and yet he could still sing the Evangelical hymns that

delighted his friends and say with them: 'He loved me and gave himself for me'. And there the matter might have rested but for the fact that an article that Glover had earlier written, 'The Free Churches during these last fifty years', appeared in *The Times* on 11th March 1932 under the provocative editorial headline 'Defeat of Spurgeon', in which Glover spoke on the importance of Fairbairn and the waning influences of Spurgeon in the denomination. Even as sympathetic a reader as Rendel Harris accused Glover of not having done justice to Spurgeon, something, Glover's biographer argued, was prejudiced by heredity, as Glover always supposed his father to have been one of the Downgrade ministers Spurgeon refused to name. Aubrey felt constrained to write to *The Times* distancing the Union from Glover's words. Once more Principal Evans emerged as reconciler, (6) Morris West pays tribute to the importance of the fact that it was he who chaired the committee that invited E. A. Payne to succeed Dr Aubrey as Secretary of the Union, and of the assurances that Evans gave 'that he would help to gain the support of men within the Spurgeon tradition' for Payne's heavy new responsibilities, a promise frustrated by Evans' almost immediate sudden death. (7)

All this history later provided the context of the christological controversy relating to an address at the 1971 Assembly, which once more the Union found difficult to handle, not least because of the need to balance the rival claims of concern for truth, the maintaining of the unity of the denomination, and the protection of the freedom of theological enquiry. Part of the Union's defence was a reaffirmation of the Union's own Declaration of Principle, whilst some made reference to the denomination's doctrinal stance implicit in its membership of the Free Church Federal Council and the World Council of Churches and in its reply to the Lambeth Appeal. (8)

As a union of churches, associations and colleges, the Baptist Union has been vulnerable in all these situations to the withdrawal of individual churches, at least for a time, (9) but it thankfully has not witnessed widespread schism as has occurred in North America, and indeed would appear to threaten there today. Current debate in Great Britain turns on issues of polity as much as issues of theology, but for the health of the denomination more thought needs to be given to the relationship between that concern for living faith and experience which overwhelms and overflows mere words, which was what, at its best, our brethren in the nineteenth century were trying to affirm in their non-credalism, and that need to have clarity of perspective about the nature of the God whom we trust and obey, which for older Baptists was more helpfully expressed in confessions and covenant commitments rather than by mere credal affirmations. (10)

NOTES

- 1 Reported in *The Baptist Times*, 11 February 1988.
- 2 A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-85*, 1986, pp.458, 552, 621. *Prospect for the Eighties*, introd. by P. Brierley, Bible Society, 1979, pp.12-14.
- 3 E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, 1959, p.188.
- 4 J. W. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940*, n.d., p.309.
- 5 E. W. Hayden, *A Centennial History of Spurgeon's Tabernacle*, 1962, p.43.

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