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LEONARD GEORGE CHAMPION 1907-1997

Leonard Champion was born and raised in Bristol and from his earliest days involved at Horfield Baptist Church where the superb R.C. Griffin was the minister. He entered into a rich Baptist tradition and it left an indelible impression which Len was always the first to acknowledge with thankfulness to God. Here he was nurtured in Christian faith through Sunday School, Bible Class and the encouragement of older members who saw in him the potential for ministry, much to his surprise. With only an elementary education he entered his teens as an apprentice to a Bristol soft-furnishings store. Once persuaded of a call to ministry, Len began the arduous task of daily work and night-school classes until he obtained the necessary School Certificate and also Greek, helped by an old parson in the city. He never forgot the sheer joy of having access to the College Library when he entered Bristol Baptist College. At the Society's 1982 Summer School he gave a paper in which he reflected on sixty years in Baptist church life, subsequently published in K.W. Clements (ed.), *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*, pp.4-14, which reveals the formative influence of these early years in Bristol. His New Testament studies took him to Germany where, under Martin Dibelius at Heidelberg, he produced his doctoral thesis on the Pauline doxology of Romans 11:33-36. On his return he ministered in the Baptist churches at Minehead (1934-38) and Rugby (1938-51), before being called back to Bristol Baptist College in 1951, first as Tutor and then Principal until he retired to Minehead in 1972.

Leonard's contribution to the work of the Baptist Historical Society was significant. His articles in the *Baptist Quarterly*, although not great in number, were well researched, original and perceptive. His early contributions reflected his dominant New Testament interest, followed by articles on the Ministry among Baptists. His special interest was in the eighteenth century and his later articles contributed to challenging the accepted Baptist historiography of the period. His paper to the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society in 1979 which considered evangelical Calvinism and Baptist church structures in the eighteenth century produced a direct response in three books of essays published by a group of younger Baptist ministers in 1981, 1985 and 1996, who met regularly for study and used Len's initiative to address the present situation for Baptists.

In 1961 he published a significant biography of Andrew Gifford (1700-84), *Farthing Rushlight*, detailing the life and times of Bristol Baptist College's most significant benefactor. This was the beginning of his challenge to Baptist historians, W.T. Whitley and A.C. Underwood, who had told the story of eighteenth-century Baptists largely from a London perspective, virtually ignoring the fact that Bristol trained over two hundred ministers in the period. They served in England, other than London, Wales, Ireland and America. His growing acquaintance with the Baptist historical records in the Bristol College Library convinced him that the heart

of Baptist life in the period was to be found in Bristol and the provinces, not London. A decade before *Farthing Rushlight* Leonard had produced *The Church in the New Testament*, comprising lectures given to an immediate post-war conference of European Baptist pastors at the newly founded European Baptist Federation Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland. In the same period he was a significant contributor to *The Meaning and Practice of Ordination among Baptists* (Baptist Union, 1957) and *The Doctrine of the Ministry* (Baptist Union, 1961). In 1962 he contributed the Baptist volume to the unity series produced by Mowbrays, *Baptists and Unity*. It was Len's understanding of the New Testament and the Baptist tradition which enabled him to challenge both the historic aberrations from the Christian faith with which all traditions abound and those specifically Baptist assumptions which he believed, on occasion, needed to be pointed in a new direction.

Len was a member of the Baptist Historical Society over many years and was an honoured Vice-President who kept in close touch with the work of the Society and was a great encourager of Baptist historians. It was with his active encouragement, which included the provision of some funding, that I began my first piece of Baptist research into the life of William Staughton (1770-1834). When he introduced me to Staughton's nineteenth-century biography, he said: 'I think we need to know more about this former student' and suggested it would be a useful subject for my probationary studies. The introduction took me to North America and the recognition that the links between British and American Baptists owe a considerable debt to that 'Bristol tradition' of concern for educated, able and evangelical ministers, which Len embodied so deeply and encouraged many of us to develop.

Just before Len died, it was my privilege to go with Dr Brian Haymes to present him with a book of essays contributed by Bristol students from his principalship and the present generation. *Bible, History and Ministry* (Bristol Baptist College, 1997), by its title reflected Len's concerns in ministry, while pastor, college principal and retired minister. It was but the most recent attempt to follow Len's example for he believed that the Baptist denomination should encourage each new generation seriously to reflect upon the faith, its practice and communication. Len's encouragement of scholarship in the service of the Gospel was considerable: and Baptist historians will be forever in his debt for that encouragement. In 1972 Dr Ernest Payne spoke at Len's retirement from Bristol Baptist College in these terms: Dr Champion is 'one who has remained undismayed in his Christian witness, thinking and service through these bewildering and difficult years, one who has transmitted the best things from the past, and has, in particular so guarded and guided Bristol Baptist College that it is ready for the new era ...' We honour his memory and acknowledge particularly his significant contribution to a better understanding of our Baptist past so that our future might be richer.