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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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### THE PROPHETIC VOICE

Part Bible study, part theology, part social analysis, part church history, part the sharing of ecumenical experience, Keith Clements admits that his *Learning to Speak: the Church's Voice in Public Affairs*, [T & T Clark, 240pp, 1995] is a difficult book for librarians to catalogue but rightly hopes that it may be found not too far from the section on mission. For me the special relevance of the volume was that I was reading it alongside preparing a report of an ecumenical team to East Timor and assisting with the drafting of resolutions for the Baptist World Alliance General Council in Hong Kong: I was engaged in just those tasks that demand an eschewing of all glib self-satisfying talk.

The book lives within the tension of believing that whilst situations often require some Christian comment, church bodies tend to say too much or speak out of the wrong motivation; Clements quotes with approval Alec Vidler's judgment, 'Political resolutions by ecclesiastical assemblies or political pronouncements by clerics frequently encourage irresponsibility. They give those who pass them or make

them or hear them the illusion that, because something has been said and written down and even published, something has been done, or at least something will be done by somebody, which unfortunately does not follow at all.' Clements is at pains to argue greater care before rushing into resolutions and statements; above all, he stresses that disciples need to be taught before they utter and that this requirement faithfully followed would bring more discipline to the church's public speaking.

In the light of this analysis, the Barmen Confession of 1934 and the South African churches' *Kairos* document of 1985 are explored as examples of pertinent speaking, speaking which arose in both cases out of a costly way of being, where the talking was certainly not a way of escape from more sacrificial witness but a function of it. In a chapter which deploys Biblical principles to analyse the contemporary western scene, aptly titled 'The Chattering Culture', the argument is that, far from western society reflecting Christian values, the church in the west needs to recognize the many ways in which she may be in danger of being conditioned by a secular society which encourages her to speak glibly to its media-conscious, market-place, quick-solution agenda.

By contrast, a biblical faith will cause the church to challenge rather than to underwrite culture, to develop a gospel counter-culture. The nature of that counter-culture has already been established by the prophets who, called 'to be for God', become the agents of announcing God's alternative history which heralds the alternative messianic vision set out by Jesus. If, then, at the heart of prophecy is being a learner before God, then the prophetic tradition feeds within the New Testament into the life of costly discipleship, that is faith-obedience to the living Christ, the birth of the church as essentially a learning community.

This learning comes both through keeping close to Christ and being sent out by him in mission which becomes the experiential basis for further teaching. 'If it would teach', argues Clements, 'the church must itself always first be a learner. It never graduates beyond discipleship.' The model whereby the church is seen as a fixed place of sanctity to which the faithful come on pilgrimage has to be rejected in favour of a model in which the whole church cuts itself free from a fixed stand so that people and church may be found learning together in community and on pilgrimage. This he links to Barth's concept of the whole people of God as 'the hearing church' and his affirmation that such a church must always listen 'to the Word of God as the norm to which the hearing church knows itself to be subject'.

'Jesus Christ should again be heard in his church as the Lord of the church', as of course he is also Lord of all creation, which is why prayerfully reading 'he signs of the times' becomes an act of humble obedience. In support of this he invokes the words of the Second Vatican Council: 'The story of the contemporary world, given flesh in the lives of men and women, becomes a book open for intense meditation by the Church and all its members, urging them to radical renewal of life and commitment.' That is to say that although the church cannot escape being under the authority of the Word of God, in all its attempts to address the world, it also needs

to be aware that it also has to learn from the world as the arena in which God is already working his purposes out. Not that those purposes are easily perceived - 'Until the last day, the world remains an ambiguous field of wheat and tares growing together. But it is God's field under the ultimate lordship of Christ.'

It seems to me important to invite those studying history with me to look beyond 'what was happening' in history to 'what was really going on'. In this task the church has an enormous advantage as arguably 'the most formidable intelligence agency in existence', with a presence 'from China to Nicaragua, from South Africa to Indonesia, from Russia to Sri Lanka, from Iraq to Canada'; so, simply at the level of information gathering, the church is a privileged institution. But more than that the church has a different scale of values whereby to discern the significance of events: humane values need to take precedence over concerns of power and profit and party advantage, in the light of the great theological affirmations about the source of history and its destiny.

Such an account of *Learning to Speak* lacks the particularity of example which imparts the essential richness to the book's analysis, linking together theological principle and real knowledge of the sufferings and oppression of particular communities. They should speak without any sense of superiority, recognizing Dean Acheson's insight that, whilst academics reach conclusions, politicians have to make decisions before decisions are made for them. Whilst this will mean that for much of the time the church will speak in the indicative, inviting policy-makers to take a more rounded view of events, or the interrogative, into the debate or enquiry, this does not exclude the possibility of electing for discreet silence or alternatively the need for the occasional imperative. At the most extreme this raises the question of *status confessionis*, that is a situation where the nature of the gospel itself is at risk; where, for example, the church itself is under threat of being invaded by a false gospel as in Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa. Discerning such a state is the ultimate issue of discernment.

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## REVIVAL AND RENEWAL IN BAPTIST LIFE

This is the last reminder of the Payne Memorial Essay Competition 1996. Essays should reach the Secretary of the Baptist Historical Society by 31 December 1996. The Society offers a prize of £100 for an original essay on this theme. For full details see previous issues of the *Baptist Quarterly*.

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In bibliographic references in the *Baptist Quarterly*, if the place of publication is not given, London should be assumed.