

# Baptists and the Great Church:

## OR INDEPENDENCY AND CATHOLICITY

(An address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society, 28th April, 1952.)

BY the Great Church I mean the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church, which I should call the Catholic Church if that had not, unhappily, become a party label. It is a perennial discussion, going back all through our Baptist history and certainly not dead yet, and it raises fundamental issues. I do not claim that I am going to say anything new. I merely offer my contribution to a continuing discussion. It is certainly continuing. Recently I saw in manuscript a chapter on the Church by a distinguished Anglican theologian in which he credited us Baptists with a completely atomistic, isolationist doctrine of the Church. He said it was fundamental to our position that individual believers made the congregation by agreeing to join together, and that the Church was made by congregations agreeing to join together. Amongst ourselves I have met not a few young people, both lay and ministers, who were unhappy with what they believed to be our position and were on that account attracted to other denominations.

I want to advance certain propositions and to raise some questions:—

I. *In the New Testament the Great Church is fundamental and prior to the local church.* I take for granted here, what I believe can be demonstrated, that though the word "Church" is to be found in only two passages in the Gospels, yet the reality of the Church underlies the whole life and teaching of our Lord. We search in vain for any detailed plans or formulated constitution, but that Jesus loved the Church and gave Himself for it is the conclusion to which all the evidence points. (See, for example, Flew, *Jesus and His Church* and Headlam, *The Doctrine of the Church and Reunion*.)

The New Testament reveals varieties of forms of organisation, diversities of gifts and of doctrinal emphasis, but its central concern is to assert and maintain the unity of the Church. The word *ecclesia* is used in two main senses (a) the universal Church to which all Christians belong, and (b) the company of believers in a particular place. The sum of Christian people throughout

the earth was *ecclesia* to the early Christians, but the same word was used for the local church, for wherever Christ was in the midst of two or three met in His Name, there was the Church. Yet it is the Great Church that is prior. The author of *I Clement* speaks almost pedantically in his opening words as he expresses this: "The Church of God which sojourns in Rome greets the Church of God which sojourns in Corinth."

(In saying that the Church means all the Christians on earth, I am not, of course, forgetting that *ecclesia* is also a supramundane reality, comprising the angelic host, the saints and martyrs in Heaven, as well as those who still live and witness below.)

One thing is certain: the Church in the New Testament is *not* a federation of local congregations. There are not many churches, but one Church in many places. The local church is the local expression of the one great universal community in heaven and earth. It is sometimes said that what we need is "unity of spirit," meaning good fellowship and absence of competition, and implying that outward unity is unimportant. But what the New Testament is concerned with is "unity of the Spirit," which is much more than mutual kindness and co-operation. I venture to suggest that Paul would not have understood what was meant by the distinction drawn by those who would make "unity of spirit" a contrast to corporate unity, or even a substitute for it. "Give diligence," he begs, "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one Body and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephes. iv. 3-4). To fail in preserving the unity of the Church is not to walk worthily and is to imperil its witness to the world. The unity of the Church exists already, a gift of God to be "kept."

A threefold unity is ascribed to the Church in the New Testament; a unity of origin, because it was brought into being by the act of God; a social unity, as the result and expression of the common divine life that is in it; a unity of temper and belief, due to a common loyalty and the pursuit of a common task. The unity of the Church is compared to the unity of a human body (1 Cor. xii. 12-30). No part of the body is autonomous. It is controlled from one centre, otherwise it is seriously unhealthy. But in the oneness is diversity—eyes, ears, hands, and a multitude of constituents that are not so obvious. The life of the personality co-ordinates the component cells. Many members, yet but one body, is the sum of the argument. (Members, of course, means individual Christians in the apostle's parable, not denominations.) Other New Testament metaphors emphasise the same point.

There is one building gradually rising in fulfilment of the Architect's plans. The vine has one life flowing through its branches. The one loaf at the Lord's Supper is a symbol of the unity of those who partake. The Church is thus one, because it comes from God; because it has one governing and directing Head, Jesus Christ; because through all its veins and arteries flows the one life-blood of the Spirit.

It is difficult to maintain the case for any one form of church order from the New Testament: there are pointers towards congregationalism, presbytery, and episcopacy. (See, for example, Streeter, *The Primitive Church*.) There are elements of uncertainty. What precisely was the nature of the authority of the Council of Jerusalem? (*Acts. xv.*). Was the church of Rome or Philippi one congregation or perhaps a church meeting in several centres? Is it not possible that the church in Rome was more like what we should call an association than a congregation? (Payne in *The Fellowship of Believers*, of which a welcome new edition, revised and enlarged, has just appeared, says, on p. 26, that "at the end of the 17th century there was a London Baptist church functioning as one unit for the election of elders and deacons, which had at least seven sections in different parts of the metropolis.") It is not clear just how much authority was claimed or exercised by the apostles, but it is certainly impossible to construct a truthful picture of New Testament church polity and ignore the existence of the apostles: as has been done by some exponents of independency.

At least it may safely be said that no New Testament local church thought of itself as self-contained and self-sufficient. It thought of itself as *the* Church of God at Corinth: the local manifestation of the one great reality, whatever measure of local autonomy it may have exercised. Christians were conscious of their brethren in the other centres of the one Church, looking to the same Lord, observing the same sacraments, cherishing the same hope: and they expressed their unity *at least* by consultation, by intervisitation, and by mutual help. It was one Church in many places: not many congregations uniting to make a church. The Great Church came first.

II. *Baptists are not tied to any one form of church government as a matter of principle.* Order may be modified in the light of experience. Even if it were proved, as I do not think it could be, that the New Testament Church was independent or congregational, it would not follow that the New Testament polity was binding upon Christians living under very different conditions. There have, of course, been Baptists, just as there have been Presbyterians and Episcopalians, who have taken a different view, but what I have enunciated is the characteristic and

“official” view, so far as any Baptist view can be. For example, the *Reply of the Baptist Union Council to the Faith and Order Conference of 1927*, said: “We do not hold that any particular form of church government was meant to be inflexible. We have sought to adapt our organisation to the varying needs of times and places, and we are ready to attend closely and sympathetically to the matters involved with a view to greater goodwill and increased efficiency in carrying out the Divine purpose.” In *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, Wheeler Robinson only says, cautiously, “Baptists hold, then, that the congregational polity of a Baptist church is one legitimate way among others of expressing the fundamental idea of the Church,”—though in a footnote he recognises that some among us urge that independency is obligatory.

There were historical reasons why congregationalism arose in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was necessary to reject the conception that the English nation or parish was a Christian church and to assert instead the truth of the “gathered church,” that only Christian men and women can make a church. The practical difficulties of a prescribed and persecuted community meeting in secret and with grave hindrances to any communication, still more to any common organisation, with like-minded groups, would make independency almost inevitable, apart from any theological reasons. It was natural and inevitable, and it enshrines elements that deserve to be preserved in any church polity. But Baptists do not stand as a matter of principle and faith for any form of church government. Our witness is in a different realm. In fact, as I proceed to show, different forms have been observed and advocated amongst us. I dispute the right of any man to say that a Baptist is under any obligation to be an independent by conviction.

III. *Accepting independency as our de facto method of church government, we ought to recognise that in theory and in practice, independency is not isolationism.* Truly understood, it is based upon the priority of the Great Church. In the well-known phrase of P. T. Forsyth, one of the greatest of Congregational theologians, “the local church was the outcrop there of the total and continuous Church, one everywhere.” “The total Church was not made by adding the local churches together, but the local church was made a church by representing there and then the total Church.” (*Church and Sacraments*, pp. 60-61.)

We do not as Baptists unchurch others. We recognise that they and we are in the one Church. *The Doctrine of the Church*, a Statement approved by the Baptist Union Council in March, 1948, declares, “Although Baptists have for so long held a position separate from that of other communions they have always claimed

to be part of the one holy catholic Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. They believe in the Catholic Church as the holy society of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, which He founded, of which He is the only Head, and in which He dwells, by His Spirit, so that though manifested in many communions, organised in various modes, and scattered throughout the world, it is yet one in Him. . . . In the worship, fellowship and witness of the one Church we know ourselves to be united in the communion of saints, not only with all believers upon earth, but also with those who have entered into life everlasting."

This is no modern degeneracy. In McGlothlin's *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (p. 79) is reproduced the Confession of the church ministered to in Holland by John Smyth, the father of the General Baptists. In it are these words: "All penitent and faithful Christians are brethren in the communion of the outward church, wheresoever they live, by what name soever they are known, which in truth and zeal follow repentance and faith, though compassed with never so many ignorances and infirmities; and we salute them all with a holy kiss, being heartily grieved that we which follow after one faith and one Spirit, one Lord and one God, one body and one baptism, should be rent into so many sects and schisms: and that only for matters of less moment." A similar assertion of the ultimate unity of the Church of Christ is to be found in the Confession of the group which followed Helwys and with him returned to London in 1612, establishing there the first Baptist Church in England (McGlothlin, pp. 88-90).

In practice also we are happily not as independent and isolationist as some definitions of independency would make out. The formation of Associations of Baptist churches was pressed forward as soon as circumstances allowed. In the *History of the Northern Baptist Churches*, by David Douglas, these are descriptions at the very outset of messengers sent by London churches to the north, and letters expressing the desire for closer fellowship from them and from churches in the West of England; and an association in Wales is reported in 1650. Both Particular and General Baptists formed district associations in areas roughly following the county lines. The General Baptists went further and had a General Assembly, which was in existence by 1653, when delegates attended from six counties besides London. It existed to advise the constituent churches; to issue declarations of belief; to unite in propaganda and evangelism; and to decide issues referred to it by individual churches. The Assembly claimed to be a supreme court for the churches, raised funds, sent out messengers, inhibited heretical preachers, and exercised powers of arbitration. In 1651 representatives of thirty congregations in Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and adjoining counties drew up a

Confession to which they invited other churches "in England, Wales, the Army and elsewhere to adhere."

One declaration of the General Assembly of the General Baptists would greatly surprise some modern Baptists. At its meeting in 1693 it affirmed that only an ordained minister was allowed to administer the Lord's Supper, and it re-affirmed this position in 1702. (*Minutes of General Assembly of the General Baptists, 1654-1728*, Whitley pp. 39, 70).

In 1678 a statement of General Baptists from Buckinghamshire, Oxford and adjoining counties went a long way in its provision for General Councils or Assemblies:—

"XXXIX. General councils or assemblies, consisting of Bishops, Elders and Brethren, of the several churches of Christ, and being legally convened and met together out of all the churches, and the churches appearing there by their representatives, make but one church and have lawful right and suffrage in this general meeting or assembly, to act in the name of Christ; it being of divine authority and is the best means under heaven to preserve unity, to prevent heresy, and superintendency among or in any congregation whatsoever within its own limits or jurisdiction. And to such a meeting or assembly appeals ought to be made, in case any injustice be done, or heresy and schism countenanced in any particular congregation of Christ, and the decisive voice in such general assemblies is the major part, and such general assemblies have lawful power to hear and determine, as also to ex-communicate" (McGlothlin, p. 154). Payne, after quoting this adds, "The General Baptists were clearly not Independents in the commonly accepted use of the term," and he refers to a meeting of General Baptist Messengers in 1696 which declared that "independence is very dangerous and detrimental" (*The Fellowship of Believers*, p. 28).

The Circular Letter of the Eastern Association for 1777 (Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 31) urges the importance of the revival of the primitive practice of associating, "as capable of restitution as baptism or the Lord's Supper or any other primitive institute." The Letter points out that Baptists came together in a General Assembly in 1689, "as soon as ever liberty of conscience was granted," and proposes a national union of delegates of the existing provincial associations on rather presbyterian lines. The Baptist Union was not in fact formed until 1813. It disclaimed any authority and certainly possessed none.

It must be remembered that the Particulars were more independent than the Generals. The Particular Baptist Confession of 1677, in the section on the church, says, "As each church and all members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ in all places; and upon

all occasions to further it . . . so the churches . . . ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love and mutual edification." And it goes on to say that when difficulties or differences arise in doctrine or administration "it is according to the mind of Christ that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider and give their advice in or about that matter in difference," though without any jurisdiction or power to impose their decisions.

Very early also the Generals appointed Messengers to have oversight of a district, e.g. in 1656 Thomas Collier was ordained by the Western Association as superintendent of all the churches in the area (Walton, *The Gathered Community*, p. 90). In the General Baptist Buckingham Confession of 1678 a distinction is drawn between Bishops or Messengers, who were officers of the wider church and the pastors or elders who were officers of local churches. The revival of the office of General Superintendent in 1917 was one of the most helpful and far-reaching decisions taken in our denominational life, though it could be wished that they were less occupied in administrative and office work.

It is fair to say that associations, assemblies and other co-operative organs were not regarded as optional but as essential by our fore-fathers. The local church is a true church only if it lives in fellowship with others. Clearly, too, many of them believed in the possession by associations and assemblies of a large measure of delegated authority.

IV. There are two particular issues in this field where we speak with an uncertain voice. I want to ask some questions.

1. *What constitutes a church?* Can any "two or three" get together and call themselves a church, even if the group is created by dissidence? Is a local church really a church if it is not associated with others in the tasks of the Great Church?

The Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union, in the *Handbook*, says that "each church has liberty under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret and administer (Christ's) laws." What is meant here by "each church"? It says earlier that "the Union shall consist of the churches, associations of churches . . . whose names are given in the *Baptist Handbook* for each year as forming the membership of the Baptist Union." Below, it is laid down that all applications for membership shall be submitted to the Council and accepted or rejected on a majority vote, with an appeal to the Assembly. In other words a church in the Baptist Union is one that is elected to the Union by the Council—which does not take us far to an answer to our question.

In the Statement on the Doctrine of the Church, quoted above, there is more fundamental discussion of principle. It says that local churches "are gathered by the will of Christ and live by

the indwelling of His Spirit. They do not have their origin, primarily, in human resolution." The basis of membership in the church is "a conscious and deliberate acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord by each individual." Later reference is made to "the perils of isolation," and emphasis is laid on the value of the B.U., the B.M.S., the B.W.A., and the work of the General Superintendents. "Indeed we believe that a local church lacks one of the marks of a truly Christian community if it does not seek the fellowship of other Baptist churches, does not seek a true relationship with Christians and churches of other communions and is not conscious of its place in the one catholic Church." Admirable! But many questions still remain unanswered. One still wonders if any group of Christians can get together and call themselves a church and demand recognition as such. Should not the concurrence of existing churches, and in most cases the dismissal of a group of members to form a church, be regarded as an essential? This, of course, has often happened. Many of our churches were deliberately formed by the action of an existing church. An interesting example is recorded in James Stuart's *History of Beechen Grove Church, Watford*. This quotes the minute book with reference to the period 1640-45 when a group in Watford were holding meetings but were "not then in a church state, but were a branch of a church in London." As their numbers grew they consulted the churches in London who were in association with them, and they "agreed that we should be set down in a church state in Watford upon certain terms which were agreed to."

Our denomination in the past was hesitant about recognising a group as a church unless provision had been made for regular pastoral oversight and the observance of the sacraments. Payne, in the book quoted more than once above, speaks of the care taken in the closing years of the eighteenth century by College Street, Northampton, in the formation of separate churches in the villages, and many other examples could easily be given. Our forefathers believed that a church was not merely a group of believers, but a disciplined and ordered company with a pastor and sacraments, solemnly associated by a covenant. Are we as particular today?

2. *What constitutes a "minister"?* Can any two or three call a man to the ministry of the Church of Christ? There is nothing so jealously guarded by our churches as the right to call as their minister whom they choose. But churches are not self-sufficient in respect of the ministry—even if they have never sent a subscription to a theological college. No man is an island: neither is any congregation. A church seldom appoints its minister from its own membership. It looks to other churches,



asks the colleges for the names of promising students, consults the superintendents. The ministry is not the concern of the individual congregation alone. The whole denomination is concerned with supply, training, finance, superintendence. Both local church and the B.U. are concerned, and both should have a say in the choice.

This is symbolised, or should be—and in the past it was customary—by the share in the ordination service of neighbouring pastors and often of the college principal and the general superintendent. In the Statement on the Doctrine of the Church it says, "The minister's authority to exercise his office comes from the call of God in his personal experience, but this call is tested and approved by the church of which he is a member and (as is increasingly the rule) by the representatives of a large group of churches. He receives intellectual and spiritual training and is then invited to exercise his gifts in a particular sphere. His authority is, therefore, from Christ through the believing community. . . . Many among us hold that since the ministry is the gift of God to the church and the call to exercise the functions of a minister comes from Him, a man who is so called is not only the minister of a local Baptist church, but also a minister of the whole Church of Jesus Christ."

Yet men still get into our ministry (I am not speaking of our Accredited List) without adequate training or supervision or the consent of the wider church. Is it really part of our claim that any man called by any Baptist church in isolation is a minister of the whole Church of Jesus Christ?

V. *Whither?* I cordially recognise not only the initial historic inevitability of congregationalism, but also the value of the independent emphasis. I am no advocate of any rigid ecclesiastical system. Both for religious and practical reasons certain responsibilities should rest in the hands of the local congregation. But I see no mystical significance in this, nor do I regard independency as divinely ordained. If episcopalians and presbyterians can learn from us—and in recent years both have moved in a congregational direction—we can also learn from them. Or, indeed, it might be sufficient if we would consent to learn from our forefathers, some of whom in some respects were wiser than we are. We ought to be inter-dependents, not independents, and certainly never isolationists. If independency means that a local congregation is self-creating, self-propagating, self-supporting, self-contained, self-governed, self-sufficient—no church is or could be or ought to be. Such a system is—or would be, because we do not have it in practice—unscriptural in basis, unworkable in practice, and un-Christian in spirit.

Democracy is not quite the right word to use of a Christian Church. It suggests wrong standards and comparisons. A

church ought to be a Christocracy. But allowing the term as representing something of value in our Baptist life, we still have to ask, if the local church is a democracy, what about its relations to other similar democracies? British democracy works, and must work by delegated authority. It is no principle of democracy that the Rural District Council is self-contained and has the last word. I believe that there are many matters where we should delegate authority to associations and the national Union.

And if it is the Christocracy that we emphasise, I am sure that Christ may be in the midst of the Baptist Union Council or Association as truly as of the church meeting. I recall a fine passage in the Report of the B.U. Polity Commission (November, 1942, p. 6). "The final authority over the Church of Christ is none other than our Lord Himself and we believe that His mind for His people is communicated through the Holy Spirit. The local church has access to that mind as it earnestly seeks to know the Lord's will. But is the Spirit's guidance only made known to the local church? . . . In our concern to guard the autonomy of the local church we have not always remembered that the Spirit of God speaks in guidance not only to the individual church, but also to a fellowship of churches who have bound themselves together in the service of our Lord, whether in a district group, or an association, or a Union. The churches in their corporate life, in virtue of the indwelling Spirit, can say with the New Testament Church, 'It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us'."

Our togetherness is as vital to us as our independency, and as much a part of our history. Let us preserve our freedom to be led by the Spirit to the most efficient polity in His service. We have much to learn about an ordered liberty from our own history; to say nothing of the experience of other denominations. Should we not be in a better position to plan and to use our resources, in evangelism, in church extension and church closing (quite as vital an issue in some places) and in a host of ways, in meeting the needs of the contemporary situation, if we had a properly delegated system of authority, over the denomination as a whole, and not only over the aided churches? We need a flexible polity to meet a new situation. We have not yet learned how to harmonise the local and the catholic; the necessary local autonomy and initiative, with the equally necessary co-operation and fellowship and common action in matters where more than the local church is concerned.

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