

The Office of "Messenger" amongst British Baptists in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

INTRODUCTION

IT is perhaps appropriate that as we celebrate the centenary of the birth of J. H. Shakespeare, the founder of the modern system of Area Superintendents amongst British Baptists, some consideration should be given to the origin and nature of "messengers," the spiritual forefathers of Area Superintendents. Moreover, at a time when the appointment of a Baptist Union evangelist is a subject for discussion, and when the best use of the ministerial manpower available is a question raised both in the Presidential Address of 1957 and frequently in correspondence in *The Baptist Times*, it may be of some help to trace how this office, which originated in the zeal for evangelism, in the course of a century become little more than a nominal authority, which sought in vain to stem the decline in the spiritual life of the original General Baptists.

ORIGIN OF THE OFFICE BEFORE 1660

It is interesting to compare the accounts given by later Baptist historians of the origin of the office of "messenger." Adam Taylor in *The History of the English General Baptists* (1818) stresses the precedent of scripture :

ever attentive however to the precedent of scripture, it was not long before they supposed that they had discovered in the primitive churches an officer superior to an elder. They remarked that Barnabas, Luke, Timothy, Titus and several others were fellow labourers with the apostles in the preaching of the gospel and the planting and regulating of churches; and that in various passages they are called apostles, or in English, messengers of the churches. They thought it probable that the angels or messengers of the seven churches in Asia to whom the author of the Revelation addressed his epistles were also of the same order. They introduced an officer into their systems whom they styled a messenger. He was generally chosen by an association of the representatives of the churches in a certain district,

and ordained by those of his own order with great solemnity, the various churches keeping seasons of prayer and fasting. Sometimes a particular church chose a messenger; but in that case his business appears to have been confined to preaching the gospel where it was not known, and regulating such churches as he might be made instrumental in planting. It is indeed probable that at the first this was the chief object of their appointment.¹

W. T. Whitley in *A History of British Baptists* (1923) emphasizes this last point of Taylor's :

The first distinctive feature was the recognition of the duty of evangelization, and telling off special men for itinerant work. Seeing that the early churches commissioned men for special journeys, as with Judas, Silas, Barnabas, Tychicus, they formally commissioned men, and gave them the same title, messengers. As first there was a special commission for each journey; soon they selected men who had particular aptitude for evangelization, told them off for it as their main work, and undertook to support them and their families. Thus the title messenger came to have a technical meaning, and since the cost of support was often more than a single church could sustain constantly, each messenger was linked with a group of churches. While evangelization was the main purpose, there followed from it the duty of organising new communities, and counselling them in their early days. Men who had the double gift were of use also in the older churches which maintained and commissioned them, and thus came to be invoked whenever internal troubles arose.²

There are three main sources of evidence for the origin of the office: the confessions of faith and minutes of assemblies of Baptist churches, the writings of individual Baptists, and the records of individual churches.

The Confession of thirty Midland Churches of 1651 does not mention such an office. Article 58 merely says "that it is the good pleasure of God that some of the gifted men should be appointed or set apart to attend upon the preaching of the word for the further edifying of the churches."³ Articles 65 and 70 provide for churches to call upon neighbouring churches for assistance in cases of poverty and controversy respectively. In 1654, however, a manifesto on their approval of civil government and disavowal of Fifth Monarchy ideas appeared on behalf of "many of the Messengers, Elders and Brethren belonging to severall of the Baptized Churches in this nation,"⁴ and was signed by thirteen messengers and eleven elders, the messengers representing churches in Lincs., Kent and Bucks. The minutes of the General Agreement of 1656 are signed by ten messengers, and include two references to the office: "messengers may not without the common consent of ye churches chuse messengers," and "messengers and elders being both apt to teach is ye presbittery of the church and no other." Later on, however, it is laid down in a case of poverty if a church is "not able to communicate to his need, that they then shall send a suffi-

cient testimony thereof to ye next congregation, that is to say a messenger appointed for that purpose."⁵ Thus the term is used both of an official order and of local representatives. In the same year at a meeting held at Stamford it was decided to send two messengers into the west for the work of the ministry, to appoint John Fairbrother and Will. Reignolds for this, and to appeal to all the churches to defray the charge of the messengers and their families. The church at Fenstanton, however, refused to help, because it was not sure about the method of collecting, and because it objected to one of the messengers as a former Ranter.⁶

The first reference to the office in a published work seems also to be in 1654 in Tho. Lover's *The True Gospel Faith*. Article 22 of this says: "That they have power to chuse Messengers, Pastors, and Teachers from among themselves," and it quotes *Acts* 1. 26.⁷ Although in 1655 Thomas Collier was ordained "General Superintendent and Messenger to all the Associated Churches" by the Particular Baptists in the west country, in a book published in 1654 and entitled *The Right Constitution and True Subjects of the Visible Church of Christ*, he says:

this sort of ministry have several titles given to it, not to distinguish, as some think, the ministry into so many offices, but rather to discover the fullness of the work, the pastor to feed, elder to rule, bishop to oversee, teacher to instruct, which may be done by one, if the gift be in him, but in short, it is especially summed up in two particulars, viz. Elders and Deacons.⁸

William Rider in his *Laying on of hands asserted*, published in 1656, disagrees with Collier, saying: "in the word 'elder' is comprehended all officers in the Church, and so elders are distinguished into several offices such as bishops and deacons."⁹ Later on he says: "the office of an apostle is the first office in the Church of Christ, and that is to lay the foundation,"¹⁰ and he maintains that this office still exists. Will. Jeffery, one of the messengers from Kent, who had signed the 1654 declaration, published in 1659 *The whole faith of man*. In this he claims that apostles, that is messengers, are to be in the church till Christ comes, "so the church are to choose messengers still for the gathering of the church, and establishing of the same, so that they are to go forth to preach the gospel."¹¹ Moreover "it is good and safe for a particular church in times of high concernment to call for, or desire help from sister churches, and so messengers, who are to take care of all churches in an especial manner, are to go in such cases."¹²

In 1654 at Canterbury, John Foxwell, Messenger, protested against Fifth Monarchy views, and in the following year a Quaker won over the Baptist Messenger Samuel Fisher.¹³ The Tunbridge Wells Minute Book records an association meeting at Chatham in 1657, which urged:

that there be all possible care in propagating the Gospel by employing ye messengers in ye work of ye Lord Jesus, sending with each of them one young disciple of good report that himself shall approve of, and that ye deacons of ye respective congregations be desired to take especial care not only of ye messengers to supply them with all things necessary for their journeyings but also that their families be well provided for in their absence."¹⁴

In other parts of the country however the office is not as clearly defined. The records of the church at Fenstanton show that the term is used both of a local temporary commission and of a more permanent and more universal mission. In 1652 various members of the church had been appointed to visit backsliders, and a later minute refers to these as messengers.¹⁵ In the following year a letter was read to the church from Westby in Lincolnshire, inquiring into the conduct of two messengers, John Lupton and Joseph Wright, who had been sent into the county of Huntingdon.¹⁶ The original commission given to these had read: "We give them power and authority to call in question all persons, and to judge and determine all matters," but when exception was taken to this at Caxton, it was crossed out.¹⁷ In the same year after Henry Denne had spoken of the need to preach the gospel where it was not known, he was "chosen and ordained by the laying on of hands a messenger to divulge the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹⁸ In 1654 it was stated that no one should preach publicly to the world or go from place to place unless they had been so commissioned by the church.¹⁹ When Henry Denne received an invitation to settle at Canterbury, he would not accept until he had received not merely the permission, but the express commission to do so from his home church.²⁰ In 1655 a member of the church at Wisbeach, John Milles, wrote to Fenstanton, saying: "I beseech you not to be negligent in the work of the Lord, but send unto us faithful messengers to do his work, and administer his ordinances to those amongst us whose hearts are free" (a controversy had arisen there over the laying on of hands).²¹ Edmond Mayle and John Denne were appointed to go, and when they reported back, they said that they had been invited to come again, but couldn't agree to return until they had had permission from their home church. They received a further commission, but Denne was recalled before reaching Wisbeach, and Mayle soon found himself in controversy there with Lupton and Wright of Lincolnshire, so did not stay long.²² Mention has already been made of the refusal by the church at Fenstanton to support messengers in the Midlands, so that the overall picture from these records is of the authority of the local church, controlling its own messengers and tending to be suspicious of those from other churches.

The earliest mention at all of the term "messenger" occurs in the records of the church at Hexham in Northumberland. A

lectureship had been established at Hexham in 1628 by the Mercers' Company, and in 1651 Thomas Tillam had been appointed to this with the backing of the commissioners appointed by Parliament to propagate the Gospel in the four northern counties.²³ He was a member of Hanserd Knolly's Particular Baptist Church in Coleman Street, London, and at the beginning of the Minute Book he records that on the 21st day of the 5th month 1652: "Thomas Tillam, minister, and a messenger of one of the seven churches in London, did administer the holy ordinance of baptism to . . ." ²⁴ Here the word messenger seems to mean missionary, and this is so in a further entry five months later when "the church with prayer, fasting, and imposition of the hands of the minister, ordained brother Hickhorngill a minister, and their messenger into Scotland."²⁵ This same minute book contains a record of letters which passed between the church at Hexham and other churches, especially Coleman Street, and in much of this correspondence the term messenger seems to be used of a representative. For instance in a letter dated 1653 the elders and pastors of several churches in the west, as well as of Coleman Street:

signify to you our longing to have with you, and all the baptized churches that hold the faith purely, such communion as that we may by letters, or messengers, in some meeting or meetings communicate to each other our knowledge for the rectifying of each other, and retaining of consent of doctrine among the churches.²⁶

Moreover, the church at Coleman Street in a covering note to this circular, writes:

much refreshing hath our gracious God afforded to our spirits lately at the return of a messenger and teacher of ours and of another . . . who were sent to visit the churches nearer us than you in the counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Norfolk, and to understand their way and order, and to further love, amongst all that love our Lord Jesus in sincerity, and communion with them.²⁷

Much of this correspondence dealt with controversy which had arisen between Tillam and the church at Newcastle, and an entry in 1656 records how representatives from Hexham and Derwent met with the messengers at Newcastle, "and each party declaring the sense of their miscarriage to the other, we were by the messengers declared to be one body in the Lord."²⁸ In all this evidence, however, from Particular Baptist Churches, the term messenger does not seem to denote a separate order, but merely a representative of one church engaged in missionary work or in consultation with representatives of other churches.

Thus it appears that throughout the decade 1650 to 1660 the term messenger was used by both General and Particular Baptists to denote anyone who was commissioned by one church to preach the Gospel and form new churches, or who was sent by one church

to another to settle a dispute or discuss matters of common concern. Amongst the General Baptists, however, in the Midlands and in Kent the word by 1654 was used also of a specific office separate from that of elders. They claimed in this respect to be acting in accordance with scripture, but unfortunately there seems to be no further evidence for the years 1651 to 1654 to ascertain the exact origin of the office.

CONSOLIDATION OF THE OFFICE 1660 TO 1700

During the reigns of Charles II and James II one of the leading General Baptists was Thomas Grantham, and his life and writings provide the main source for evidence concerning the messenger's office in this period.

Adam Taylor has summarised his life in these words :

During these two reigns he was ten times thrown into prison, and was often confined for many successive months. In this interval we shall find him preaching the gospel, founding churches, nursing them up to maturity, and setting in order the things that were wanting in London, at Norwich, at Lynn Regis, at Warboys, at Warwick, and various other distant places; but it is with the baptized churches in Lincolnshire that he was most closely connected.²⁹

He was baptized at Boston in 1653, in 1656 became the elder of the church at Halton Holegate, and in 1660 at the age of 26 went with the messenger Joseph Wright to present a petition to Charles II from the Baptists of Lincolnshire. In 1666 he was ordained a messenger, and Adam Taylor quotes his own words from his *Dispute with Connould* (1691) :

I was elected by the consent of many congregations, and ordained to the office of a messenger by those who were in the same office before me. The place where I was ordaind was in my own mansion or dwelling house, the place where the church usually met. . . . I was chosen by the consent of many churches to take a larger trust: and ordained messenger to oversee the churches in divers places that had need of help.³⁰

It is in the writings of Grantham that the messenger's office is most fully justified and expounded. He first dealt with it in an appendix to *A Sigh for Peace* (a defence of laying on of hands) published in 1671 entitled *A defence of the office of apostles; and of the continuance thereof in the church till the end*. This was reprinted in 1674 as *The successors of the apostles, or A discourse of the office of messengers, or apostles of Christ and his Church, and how they are to succeed the chief apostles in those things only, which were ordinary and fixed in that ministry, shewing therewithal, That it is impious presumption for any to pretend to succeed the Great Apostles in any part of their office which was extraordinary*. The same treatise was included in his *Christianismus Primitivus* of

1678 in Book 4 as Treatise 5 with the title *A Defence of the office of Subordinate Apostles of Christ, or Messengers of his churches, and the perpetuity of his ministry by divine institution for the more orderly promulgation of the gospel, and the better settlement of the churches to the end of the world.*

He points out first of all in what respect there are now no apostles, in the sense that the first apostles received their mission from Christ Himself by infallible revelation to lay an infallible foundation, for which mission they were endowed with gifts of tongues, miracles, signs or mighty deeds. He then lists three respects in which there are now apostles :

1. In respect of lawful power or authority to preach the gospel in all places, at all times, to all persons, as occasion and opportunity by God's providence shall be given them.
2. Unwearied diligence in teaching and strengthening both pastors and churches (chiefly those which are but newly settled in the faith) in all the council of God; and by labouring to perfect that which is lacking concerning the faith of any churches.
3. In being set for a defence of the gospel, or doctrine once delivered, against false apostles, or such as would introduce false doctrine; and also to strengthen the hands of particular pastors against usurpers, or such as despise the ministry of Christ.³¹

He defends these claims by referring to the perpetuity of the Divine Commission of *Matt. 28*, the duration of the spiritual gifts mentioned by Paul, the practice of the Early Church, and even of those churches today which deny the office, and finally the state of the world. He then deals with certain objections to the office, the main one being the danger lest such an office should "lead to setting up of Archbishops or some other anti-Christian usurpation."³² He answers this by pointing out that every church has the right to send forth such ministers, who remain members of that church subject to its discipline, and that their pre-eminence is only a degree of honour not of power.

In 1679 *An Orthodox Creed* was issued by 55 messengers, elders, and brethren of churches in Bucks., Herts., Bedford and Oxford. Its aim was "to unite and confirm all true Protestants in the fundamental articles of the Christian religion against the errors of Rome," and this perhaps accounts for the fact that article 31 "of officers in the Church of Christ" outlines three definite offices, and describes messengers throughout as bishops. They are to be :

chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the Church, and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands by the bishops of the same function, ordinarily, and those bishops so ordained have the government of those churches, that had suffrage in their election, and no other ordinarily; as also to preach the word or gospel to the world or unbelievers.³³

Bishops are to ordain elders. It is interesting to note that here already "the government of the churches" is mentioned before the task of preaching the Gospel.

Article 39 of the same creed dealt with the authority of general assemblies to preserve unity and prevent heresy.³⁴ It is from the records of the General Assembly meeting in London that further information can be found about messengers in this period. The 1689 meeting dealt with objections to the ordaining of elders as messengers, and decreed that "three distinct officers must have their distinct ordinations."³⁵ In 1691 the assembly agreed to send a messenger from Kent to assist Grantham in Norwich, and it gave its approval for the ordination of two new messengers³⁶—there is no mention before of this having been necessary. In the following year it sent a circular letter to the churches appealing to them to give a yearly contribution towards the charge of the messengers sent to preach the Gospel.³⁷

In a sermon preached at the funeral of William Reeve, who had been messenger of the churches in Nottinghamshire, Francis Stanley, another messenger, in 1696 described him as "a man subject to like infirmities and imperfections as other men," "one of Christ's messengers, a great traveller about his Lord and Master's business, for he had his Lord's commission and his Master's blessed pattern," "a painful labourer in travelling, preaching, instructing, contending, defending," "a useful and profitable preacher," "a skilful defender of the truth and faith."³⁸

The evidence for Particular Baptists in this period shows that they continued to use the term messenger to denote the representative of a church, but they explicitly denied that there was any third order in the ministry, although they recognized the need for evangelists at large. Thus Vavassor Powell, one of the leading Welsh Baptists, in *A Confession of Faith*, published in 1671, wrote :

as Christ hath given extraordinary and ordinary officers, as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of his body, so, for the feeding, teaching, ruling and ministering to the poor and sick of the church, the Lord hath appointed elders (or bishops) and deacons with other helps, who are to be chosen by the churches themselves, and ordained, as formerly they were, either by apostles, or some appointed by them as evangelists, or by some teachers in those particular churches.³⁹

Thomas Collier in *The Body of Divinity* (1674) lists the officers of the church as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, but from *Ephesians* iv. describes prophets as a gift to the church rather than a distinctly ordained office. In talking of apostles, after saying that there are now none in the original sense of the word, he continues : "though according to the commonsense of the word 'apostle,' so we have, or might have, or should have, apostles in the

church, it signifying a messenger."⁴⁰ He calls evangelists ordinary apostles, and says they are to be chosen out of the prophets, as also are pastors and teachers, elders and bishops. Fourthly, he lists deacons. Both of these writers seem to hold much in common with such a General Baptist as Grantham on the need for modern apostles, but they stop short of regarding them as a separate office.

In 1689 there was held in London "the General Assembly of Divers Pastors, Messengers, and ministering brethren of the Baptized Churches." The sense in which the term messenger is used here can be seen from the circular letter sent to the churches beforehand: "We do therefore humbly intreat you that you would be pleased to appoint two of your brethren, one of the ministry and one principal brother of the congregation with him as your messengers."⁴¹ The minutes of this and later association meetings of Particular Baptists are signed by the elder and then the messenger of each church, showing that the term is used of the non ministerial representative. In Article 26 "of the Church" in the confession of faith issued by this assembly, it is said that "the officers appointed by Christ are Bishops or Elders and Deacons." Later on in cases of difficulties or differences it is provided that :

churches holding communion together do by their messengers meet to consider, and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled are not entrusted with any church power properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers.⁴²

In 1695 the Yorks. and Lancs. Association repudiated the claim of an evangelist to some superiority on the ground that he had been ordained a minister at large by the Bromsgrove Church.⁴³ In 1697 Benjamin Keach in *The glory of a true church* writes: "a church thus constituted ought forthwith to choose them a Pastor, Elder or Elders, and Deacons (we read of no other officers or offices abiding in the church)."⁴⁴ Later on he says that there are no ruling elders besides the pastor, although there may have been in the Primitive Church.⁴⁵

By the end of the seventeenth century therefore the office of messenger was an essential part of the organisation of the General Baptists—in the words of Whitley: "From this time (1679) forward there is no indication that any doubt was felt as to the scripturalness of the office, its permanence, and its necessity."⁴⁶ Evangelism was still the chief object of the office. Amongst Particular Baptists, however, such an office had been definitely repudiated, and the term messenger amongst them henceforward signified merely the representative of a local church. This was largely due to a different conception of the Church. Particular Baptists held rigidly to the

independency of the local church, whilst General Baptists, in theory though not always in practice, gave considerable powers to the Assembly

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE OFFICE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The main developments in the office of messenger after 1700 can be grouped under two headings—appointment and duties.

In Adam Taylor's account of the appointment of Joseph Hooke, there can be seen what was probably the normal procedure at the end of the seventeenth century :

At the first meeting (of the Lincs. Association in 1695) it was proposed to call Mr. Joseph Hooke to the office of messenger; and the proposal being approved, both by this association and the general assembly in London (he is mentioned in the minutes of the Assembly meeting of June, 1696), and Mr. Hooke and his church having also acceded to it, he was very solemnly ordained to that office, Sept. 2nd, 1696 by Mr. Francis Stanley, messenger of the baptized churches in Northants.⁴⁷

The initiative lies with the local association, but their nomination must be passed by the Assembly and by the local church, the whole procedure culminating in a solemn ordination service by another messenger. No man could take the office upon himself—in 1697 John Cox had appealed to the Assembly to send a minister into Yorkshire,⁴⁸ but in 1700 the Assembly said it could not set him apart as a messenger until he had been recommended by his Association,⁴⁹ and in 1702 we find the Association warning the churches of his Judaism.⁵⁰ It was not always easy to persuade a local church to release one of its elders for the office of messenger. In 1711 the Western Association nominated Benjamin Miller, and the Assembly sent a letter to his church at Downton asking them to release him,⁵¹ but in the minutes of 1714 we read : "a letter was drawn up to be sent to Downton in Wiltshire to excite the church there to admit Bror. Benj. Miller to the office of a messenger."⁵² The man himself was not always willing—at the 1724 Assembly four brethren were appointed to "discourse Bro. Field about the affair of a messenger,"⁵³ and they were evidently successful as the following year a letter was sent to the church at Burnham asking them to release him.⁵⁴ The reasons why a local church refused to give up one of its elders as a messenger varied. Adam Taylor recounts how John Hursthouse, pastor of Monksthorpe and Burgh, was repeatedly chosen by the Lincs. Association for the office of messenger, but his church refused permission, and he continues "these zealous endeavours of the ministers seem to have been but feebly seconded by the body at large and therefore to have produced very little effect."⁵⁵ On the other hand the minute book at Canterbury records that in March, 1712 :

it was decided that Bro. Hobbs should give the mind of the church to the friends that should come from the association concerning Bro. Jarman and Bro. Ongly their being chosen messengers which is as followeth, that Bro. Ongly being in his old age we are loath to have such a burden laid upon him and that Bro. Jarman shall be left to God and his own liberty.

In the following month, however, this was amended, and Bro. Ongly also was "left to God and his own liberty," and in May it was agreed that Bro. Jarman should go to Horsham to be ordained, "and that we should endeavour to persuade Bro. Ongly to go also."⁵⁶ It was not essential to have a messenger ordaining a messenger—Adam Taylor records that in 1708 the Association authorised six elders to ordain Mr. T. Ulliyott as no messenger could be obtained.⁵⁷ Nor was every name brought before the Assembly at London—the 1711 Assembly told the Kentish Association to hasten the ordination of Miller and Norden and of any others elected by them, or if they wished they could commend them to the Assembly first.⁵⁸ It appears from the minute book of the Bucks. Association that during the period of the two rival General Assemblies it was the practice for associations to propose names to the Midland Assembly for ordination as messengers.⁵⁹

As the century proceeded however the initiative in appointing messengers passed from local associations to the Assembly, and this is one of many evidences of spiritual decline amongst General Baptists in the eighteenth century. The minutes of the Assembly show two signs of this. In the first place year after year appeals are made for more messengers. The first such plea comes in 1709;⁶⁰ the next in the following year resulted in a letter being sent to the churches, which read :

Brethren, there having been very great and moving complaint made to us from divers parts of this kingdom of the great want and real necessitie there is of more messengers to be chosen and sent forth for the preaching of the gospell and the more effectual taking care of those in distressed churches that are ready to languish and perish as to religious things without a speedy supply. . . .⁶¹

Further appeals are made in 1714, 1728, 1732, 1734, 1737, 1743, 1744, 1763, 1766, 1767.⁶² The other sign is the repeated appeals for financial support for the messengers. The 1710 letter to the churches continued :

We believe that there may be some persons found if a competent supply can be raised for them . . . the method we propose for raising a competency is as follows :

- (1) that you'll deput an active lively man to collect all such sums
- (2) that all who are willing and capable should pay weekly a farthing or halfpenny
- (3) that the monies so raised be sent yearly to the Association so thence remitted to the Generall Assembly
- (4) or any better method.⁶³

A further appeal was made in 1714 especially for two messengers who had been sent to Virginia.⁶⁴ There was a central fund endowed—Adam Taylor mentions that a Mr. Pierce Johns left £15 yearly to the support of the travelling ministers or messengers from the London General Assembly.⁶⁵ Local churches sometimes were generous to their own messenger—the East Kent minute book records decisions to make a “liberal collection” for Searles Jarman before Christmas in each of the years 1725-7.⁶⁶ In 1769 in answer to a query from Chatham the Assembly decided that “all those churches who have or shall send for a messenger to do them service ought to pay their expence and to satisfy them for their trouble and absence from their family,”⁶⁷ but in 1771 the Kent Association sent a resolution to the Assembly asking for some better method for defraying the expenses of messengers,⁶⁸ and in that year the Assembly decided that a general collection should be held in every church, and remitted each year to the treasurer of the Assembly, Mr. Jemmet.⁶⁹

Another change that can be observed is in the qualification necessary for election to the office of messenger. In 1712 two of the six messengers ordained by the Kent Association were not elders,⁷⁰ and one of them, James Richardson, who was probably the most outstanding messenger of this period, was later refused permission to join the Fraternal at the British Coffee House because he was not an elder, and as a result he used to attend the Baptist Board of the Particular Baptists.⁷¹ In 1734 the Assembly decreed that it was not necessary for a messenger to have been an elder,⁷² but in 1768 this was said to be most proper and orderly,⁷³ and in 1780 the rule was definitely made that no person could be ordained a messenger who had not been an elder.⁷⁴

In several ways the life of James Richardson shows the changing nature of the messenger's office. He was the last to have a real zeal for evangelism and planting new churches. Throughout his life he was the foremost supporter of the mission to Virginia, but he himself did not do pioneering work. For many years he was the minute secretary of both the General Assembly and the Kent Association, and he toured the country and Ireland, ordaining officers and setting the churches in order. Whitley describes his life as “a sign that the messenger was becoming more of a superintendent of existing churches than a founder of new.”⁷⁵

This development in the duties of a messenger can be seen from the minutes of the General Assembly, of Associations, of individual churches, and from writings on the office of messenger.

The minutes of the Assembly only mentions messengers planting new churches in reference to the mission to Virginia and Carolina.⁷⁶ In 1704 two were sent to Ely to help the church there to settle a personal dispute. In 1714 and 1715 messengers are

appointed to ordain other messengers and elders,⁷⁷ and in the latter year four are sent "to inquire amongst churches around Norwich."⁷⁸ In 1721 two are sent to Ireland "to take upon them as much as in them lies to settle the affairs of such church or churches as to them shall seem most to the honour and glory of God."⁷⁹ For fifty years there is no direct reference to the duties of messengers, but then in 1774 it is agreed :

that the messengers be requested in their several districts to visit the churches of the general Baptist denomination, admonishing such who have omitted sending representatives to the Assembly to renew their connection; and that those who send representatives be intreated to continue to do so that by the united efforts and zeal of the churches in general, religion may be revived more and more amongst us.⁸⁰

From the following year the messengers seem to have submitted a general report to the Assembly on the state of the churches arising from their visitation.⁸¹

The records of Associations and individual churches show the same thing. In East Kent the messengers lived in their home town, presided at meetings of the Association, composed differences in churches in their area, ordained elders and deacons, and represented the churches at the annual assembly in London.⁸² The same kind of work was done by such messengers as John Brittain in Bucks. The records of the Church at Ford show him visiting them to ordain deacons and elders, and presiding at the breaking of bread frequently during a period when they were short of elders.⁸³ The Amersham records reveal an interesting point in the years following 1723. Baptism was administered by any Church member, but the laying on of hands was performed only by a messenger. Thus an entry for 1724 reads: "Henry Saxton was baptized by Bro. Jonathan Widmore, Administrator, and came under hands in order to communion Mr. Jn. Brittain, messenger to ye Baptized Churches, Administrator."⁸⁴ In 1736 a couple were baptized by Bro. Beck, and came under hands of the messenger, Bro. Hobbs, ten days later.⁸⁵ This Bro. Beck was ordained an elder in 1740,⁸⁶ and by 1747 was the administrator for the laying on of hands,⁸⁷ and from then on elders often did it, but for twenty years this Church seems to reflect Church of England practice in confirmation. Adam Taylor mentions the ordination as messenger for Lincs. in 1731 of William Johnson, and says of him: "He was punctual in attending meetings, and annually visited most of the societies under his superintendence."⁸⁸ This annual visit of a messenger seems to have become the most important part of their office by the second half of the century. In 1783 the Kent Association asked their messengers to give notice to the churches of their annual visit!⁸⁹ Adam Taylor records a minute of the Lincs. Association meeting at Coningsby

in 1775 which shows the great authority given to messengers in this respect :

The messenger, who is chosen by the unanimous consent and approbation of the churches which stand in a close connection together, hath full liberty and authority, according to the gospel, to freely inquire into the state of the churches respecting both the pastor and people, to see that the pastors do their duty in their places, and the people theirs: he is to exhort, admonish, and reprove both the one and the other as the occasion calls for. In virtue of his office he is to watch over the several flocks committed to his care and charge. To see that good order and government be carefully and constantly kept up and maintained in the churches he is called and appointed to look after and watch over; to labour to keep out innovations in doctrine, worship and discipline, and to stand up in defence of the gospel.⁹⁰

Joseph Hooke in *A necessary apology for the baptized believers*. (1701) follows Grantham quite closely in claiming scriptural justification for a third order of ordained ministers.⁹¹ He then shows: "that our Lord Christ hath some work to do which no other officers but messengers are obliged to do by office," and he mentions preaching the Gospel in remote places, planting churches, ordaining officers, setting things in order, defending the Gospel, and says that elders of churches, being fixed ministers, cannot do such work.⁹² He says that the original name apostle was changed to bishop, "and it concerns Christians to beware that they do not call the successors of the apostles, Bishops or Elders, so long till it be forgotten they are itinerant ministers, and what work their office obliges them to do."⁹³ John Tasker in 1729 still makes this the main duty of messengers in: *Plain reasons for a Religious, Conscientious and Peaceable Separation from the Communion of the Church of England, wherein is shown, 1. the good order and constitution of the Baptist Churches*. He points out that "our church constitution is according to the primitive pattern . . . we have three sorts of ordained officers amongst us," and he continues: "the business of messengers was to preach the Gospel in remote places, plant churches, ordain elders, and set in order things that were wanting in all churches."⁹⁴ A new emphasis is however evident in a sermon preached at the funeral of the messenger Richard Drinkwater at Chichester in 1743 by Matthew Randall: "He spared neither time, expence, nor pains in visiting the members of Christ in any part of the nation; either where gifts were wanting, differences were unreconciled, or disorders appeared, needing a proper remedy."⁹⁵ Grantham Killingworth, a descendant of the messenger Grantham, in 1757 wrote, *A full and particular answer to the Rev. Mr. Whiston's friendly address to the Baptists, the whole giving a more certain and distinct account of the principles and practices of the General Baptists than any other piece heretofore published*. He does not mention the duties of messengers, only their existence as equivalent to bishops, "the

baptists seem to me to be the only body of christian people, who rightly constitute their three orders of ecclesiastical governors, bishops, presbyters, and deacons, I mean, as chosen by the christians themselves, over whom they are to preside."⁹⁶ The changed conception of the function of a messenger is fully seen in the appendix to William Evershed's sermon on *The Messenger's Mission*, preached at the ordination of messengers at Canterbury in 1783. He writes : "Hence it appears that the apostles planted churches, and those messengers could do it also, yet it was not their peculiar work and business, for persons planted churches who were neither apostles nor messengers, e.g. Philip." He then lists the duties of messengers as three : 1. To set in order things that are wanting. They are to do this by visiting the churches even when they are not sent for, and the churches are not to resent this. 2. To remedy abuses in a spirit of gentleness and patience. 3. To ordain elders. Only once in the New Testament is this not done by an apostle or messenger.⁹⁷

Thus by the second half of the eighteenth century the messenger was no longer primarily an evangelist, but more like a bishop in the Church of England, ordaining, visiting, remedying abuses, and presiding at associations and assemblies. This major change does not seem to have met with much opposition within the denomination, only outside it. There are isolated examples of protests about messengers usurping authority. In 1712 in Lincolnshire Joseph Hooke disclaimed all opinions contrary to the independency of the churches, after disputes had arisen from his attempts to put into practice the Expedient suggested in *The Unity of the Churches*.⁹⁸ In 1714 at the Bucks. Association "the following question was left on consideration till next association, whether the continuance of the Messenger's office can be defended and maintained by clear scriptural evidence," but there is no later minute on this point.⁹⁹ The Kent Association minutes have this entry for 1770 : "Whereas a charge by Mr. Stanger and others have been brought against Bro. Dan. Dobell for sowing discord among people at Bessells Green and in his office being overbearing as a messenger, it is opinion of Association that charge is not supported."¹⁰⁰

Particular Baptists continued to oppose such an office. Daniel Turner in *A compendium of social religion, or the nature and constitution of Christian Churches with the respective qualifications and duties of their officers and members* (1758) wrote : "And as to an episcopal order or jurisdiction, superior to that of elders, I cannot find anything like it in the scripture account of the matter."¹⁰¹ Charles Whitfield in *The form and order of a Church of Christ*, written in 1775 to the Church at Hamsterly in Durham, describes apostles, prophets, and evangelists as extraordinary officers, who are succeeded by ordinary officers, elders and deacons : "therefore we are not to look for nor expect any more in their office, but

to reject them with disdain, who impiously assume any such characters."¹⁰² The New Connection of General Baptists took the same view. The Assembly minutes reveal repeated attempts, especially by Gilbert Boyce, messenger in Lincs., to arrange a union between the two bodies of General Baptists. Negotiations in 1777 and in 1784-5 fell through owing to the old Assembly insisting on the divine institution of the messenger's office, and the laying on of hands, whilst the New Connection was prepared to tolerate a difference of opinion on both these subjects.¹⁰³ Adam Taylor, writing as a member of the New Connection in 1818 on the resolution of the Lincs. Association in 1775 (quoted above), says "such an inquisitor general is totally incompatible with the independency of the churches, professed by these Christians."¹⁰⁴

The old General Baptists declined further in the nineteenth century, and Whitley, writing in 1909, said: "Today although the Assembly is no longer aggressively evangelistic, the Messengers are regarded as peculiarly its officers, and three of them uphold the continuity of the order."¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSIONS

From this study of the office of messenger amongst General Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, certain conclusions can be drawn, which may be of some relevance to the contemporary situation.

The messenger's office originated in the passion of the early General Baptists for preaching the Gospel where it was not known in its purity, and for planting as a result new fellowships of baptized believers. It is a sad commentary on the weakness of human organisation that when this passion was lost, this same office became one of the chief stumbling blocks to union between the old General Baptists and the New Connection, who a century later reflected the fervour for evangelism of the original messengers. The address of Henry Denne to the Church at Fenstanton in 1653 which led to his ordination as their messenger is a good illustration of this missionary concern:

I desire that we may seriously consider the former words, Go, teach all nations, baptizing them, whether we are not as much bound to observe them as any. And if it appeareth that we are, then I pray consider whether we are not in a great fault, in being so negligent in sending forth persons to divulge the gospel, in those many places that are ignorant thereof.¹⁰⁶

The extent of its concern for those outside is a good test of the spiritual vitality of any church or group of churches.

The local church proved to be all-important in the success or failure of such a mission, for the General Baptist throughout believed

that the final authority lay with the local church. Some freely gave up their gifted ministers for a wider mission, others jealously kept them and resented outside interference. Such an attitude would seem to have been present around 1690 in the Church at Ford, which refused to allow other churches to invite Bro. Hunt (later a messenger) to preach without the permission of three of their own elders.¹⁰⁷ To day the progress of extension work and the future of small causes depend upon the willingness of larger churches to sacrifice both in money and in manpower.

The initiative in appointing messengers lay chiefly with associations, and largely through the enterprise of James Richardson, the Kent Association was most active in the first two decades of the eighteenth century in sending forth messengers both at home and abroad.¹⁰⁸ Later, however, Association life declined, and the Assembly minutes reveal repeated appeals on the national level for money and for men, which seem quite familiar to modern ears used to appeals for the Home Work Fund. This suggests that the key to the problem lies not at the national assembly level, but with the local county association.

The decline in the spiritual vitality of the General Baptists resulted in an organisation, which in relation to messengers, reflected the practice of the Church of England in several ways. Whether this was deliberate or not cannot properly be ascertained. Comparison with the Particular Baptists shows that although they had at first very similar people, they never allowed them to become a separate office, and they had a more flexible and less centralised organisation. This may be of some relevance to ecumenical discussions today. To take episcopacy into our system merely in order to have three orders like the Church of England would be to follow the example of the General Baptists with probably the same result, a decline in spiritual vitality. The history, however, of the role of messenger amongst both General and Particular Baptists shows the value of some form of bishop (neither group was afraid of the word), whose prime duty would be evangelism, and whose other duties such as visitation, administration and ordination would be subsidiary to that.

Thomas Grantham in his writings quoted 1 *Corinthians* xii. in his defence of the messenger's office,¹⁰⁹ and it is perhaps this passage with its stress on the work of the Holy Spirit before and above and through human organisation that provides the best closing comment on the history of the office of messenger: "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1. *Cor.* xii, v. 11, R.S.V.).

NOTES

- ¹ Adam Taylor: *History of the English General Baptists*, Vol. 1, p. 413f.
- ² W. T. Whitley: *A History of British Baptists*, p. 87f. (See further his introduction to the *Minutes of the General Assembly*, pp. xxviii, xxx, and on pp. xxxiii, xxxv: "An incomplete list of Messengers known, with the dates when they emerge and disappear," where he lists 75 names between 1653 and 1804).
- ³ W. J. McGlothlin: *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 105.
- ⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptists* (ed. W. T. Whitley), Vol. 1, p. 1, list of signatories p. 5.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6f.
- ⁶ *Records of the Churches of Christ gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham* (ed. E. B. Underhill), p. 196-8.
- ⁷ Tho. Lover: *The True Gospel Faith*, p. 9.
- ⁸ Thomas Collier: *The Right Constitution and True Subjects of the Visible Church of Christ*, p. 19f.
- ⁹ William Rider: *Laying on of hands asserted*, p. 16.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹¹ Will Jeffery: *The Whole Faith of Man*, p. 96.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- ¹³ Mentioned in the article *Baptists in East Kent from 1643*, in *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. 2, p. 91f.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. 3, p. 247, in the article "Two Association Meetings in Kent 1657."
- ¹⁵ *Fenstanton Records*, p. 40.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60ff. For further details of Lupton see Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 205.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68f.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72. For a summary of the life of Henry Denne see Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 147.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105-13.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128f.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 142, 156.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 304 and footnote on same page.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 346f.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- ²⁹ Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 211f.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- ³¹ Thomas Grantham: *Christianismus Primitivus*, p. 154.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- ³³ McGlothlin, *op. cit.*, p. 146f.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ³⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 1, p. 27.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ³⁸ Francis Stanley: *A sermon preached at the funeral of Mr. William Reeve, a minister of Christ and servant to the Church*, p. 25. For Stanley see Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 233, 321, and for Reeve, *ibid.*, p. 236.
- ³⁹ Vavassor Powell: *A Confession of Faith*, p. 37.
- ⁴⁰ Thomas Collier: *The Body of Divinity*, p. 476.
- ⁴¹ From the letter to the Church at Luppitt in Devon quoted in Ivimey *History of the Baptists*, Vol. 1, p. 479.

- 42 McGlothlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 266-8.
- 43 Mentioned in the article, *Association Life until 1815*, in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. 5, p. 26.
- 44 Benjamin Keach, *The glory of a true church*, p. 7.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 46 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Intro., p. xxix.
- 47 Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 319.
- 48 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 1, p. 51.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 55 Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 106.
- 56 From the Minute Book of the Church at Canterbury 1711-21, to be seen on microfilm in Dr. Williams's Library.
- 57 Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 100.
- 58 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 1, p. 114.
- 59 See the article on *The General Baptist Association in Bucks.* in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. 4, pp. 84-7.
- 60 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 1, p. 103.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 62 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 124, 148, Vol. 2, pp. 8, 26, 42, 67, 71, 125, 131, 134.
- 63 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 110.
- 64 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 124.
- 65 Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 336.
- 66 From the Minute Book of "the Churches in and about East Kent," 1717-34, to be seen on microfilm in Dr. Williams's Library.
- 67 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 2, p. 138.
- 68 From the Minute Book of the Kent and Sussex Association, 1768-1819, to be seen on microfilm in Dr. Williams's Library.
- 69 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 2, p. 143.
- 70 See Whitley's remarks on Richardson in his Introduction to the *Minutes of the General Assembly*, p. xxixf., and the article on Henry Miller in *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. 4, p. 300.
- 71 See the article on *The Baptist Board* in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. 5, p. 107, and the note on Richardson on p. 114.
- 72 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 2, p. 26.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 168f.
- 75 Whitley: *History of British Baptists*, p. 172. For further details of Richardson see Whitley's Introduction to the *Minutes of the General Assembly*, pp. xxixf. and lxx-lxxv.
- 76 *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 1, pp. 124, 146, Vol. 2, p. 54. For further details see the article on *Kentish Missionaries in Virginia* in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. 4, pp. 55-7.
- 77 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 124, 128.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 80 *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 152.
- 81 *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 157, 162, 165, 169.
- 82 See the article on *Baptists in East Kent from 1643*, in *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. 2, p. 140.
- 83 *The Church Books of Ford or Cuddington and Amersham in the County of Bucks.* (ed. W. T. Whitley, 1912), pp. 155-7, 159, 161, 165.

- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245.
⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 247.
⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 248.
⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
⁸⁸ Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 109.
⁸⁹ See note 68.
⁹⁰ Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, note on p. 415.
⁹¹ Joseph Hooke: *A necessary apology for the baptized believers*, p. 77.
⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 80.
⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 83. For further details of Joseph Hooke see Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 99-106, note 98 below, and note 47 above.
⁹⁴ John Tasker: *Plain Reasons*, p. 11.
⁹⁵ *The exalted hopes of the righteous, at, and after death, considered in a sermon occasioned by the death of that faithful servant of Christ, Mr. Richard Drinkwater, preached at Chichester, April 24, 1743, by Matthew Randall*, p. 22f.
⁹⁶ Grantham Killingworth: *A full and particular answer*, p. 3.
⁹⁷ William Evershed: *The Messenger's Mission*, pp. 25-30.
⁹⁸ Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 99ff.
⁹⁹ Quoted in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. 4, p. 214.
¹⁰⁰ See note 68.
¹⁰¹ Daniel Turner: *A compendium of social religion*, p. 40.
¹⁰² Charles Whitfield: *The form and order of a Church of Christ*, p. 33.
¹⁰³ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 2, p. 183, and Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 214, 324.
¹⁰⁴ Adam Taylor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 415.
¹⁰⁵ Intro. to the *Minutes of the General Assembly*, p. xxx.
¹⁰⁶ *Fenstanton Records*, p. 71.
¹⁰⁷ *Ford Church Book*, p. 11.
¹⁰⁸ See note 76.
¹⁰⁹ Grantham, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

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