

# Baptists and the Ministry

## THE BAPTIST MINISTER AND THE BAPTIST UNION

**B**UILDING a bridge between theological affirmation and ecclesiastical administration is a task beset with great difficulties. Current discussions are making us Baptists aware how intricate are these problems with regard to the Ministry. If a man has been elected to the pastorate of a local church, theologically we affirm that he is a minister. Yet as regards denominational organization he cannot be accredited unless he has complied with certain requirements laid down by the Baptist Union. His name can appear in the Handbook in the column for Pastors on the pages devoted to the list of churches. His name cannot appear on the list of ministers towards the end of the book.

The Handbook does not seek to hide the anomaly. It points out, under "Ministerial Recognition Rules."

"The Union acknowledges that there are others whose names do not appear on the above-mentioned Accredited Lists who are ministers of Baptist churches and may rightly be designated Baptist ministers."

This surely is an honest admission that Baptist churches are one thing and the Baptist Union another. No one can feel happy about this state of affairs. If the trend of our time is to transform the Union of Baptist Churches into the Baptist Church, then the measure of how far we are going in this direction will be the extent to which we can tackle the problem of ministerial accrediting.

### I

First let us take note of how the present situation arose, though Dr. Payne's forthcoming *History of the Baptist Union* is likely to give us a more precise statement of the facts.

A major aim in forming the Baptist Union was to make better provision for the training and maintenance of ministers. A college as old as Bristol had long been engaged on the task of training men but only a small number of pastors had enjoyed these advantages.

The Union envisaged one of its chief tasks as increasing the supply of ministers who were both godly and learned.

In its early decades the achievements of the Baptist Union were very limited. Yet increasingly its Handbook met a need in giving information about Baptists. In the issue for 1867 we have, for instance, an alphabetical list of Baptist ministers with simply the towns in which they were resident. The note at the top states :

“Great pains have been taken to make this list as accurate as possible . . . The Editor will be thankful to be informed of any errors or omissions, so that they may be corrected or supplied in future issues.”

It appears that for a minister to ask for his name to be inserted was sufficient.

In 1869 changes were introduced. Not only the College where the minister was trained was inserted in relevant cases and the year in which he commenced his ministry, but the list carried this notice at the head :

“Names are added to the List only on the recommendation of tutors of colleges, secretaries of associations, three accredited Baptist ministers or three members of the Baptist Union Committee.”

The 1889 Handbook shows things carried a stage further. “The List of Baptist Ministers” is prefixed in this way :

“A name is placed on this List by vote of the Council of the Baptist Union, who require a recommendation (1) by tutors of colleges, or (2) by secretaries of associations, or (3) by three members of the Council.”

It is more than likely that the Trustees of Funds to which the impecunious minister applied for assistance found this list increasingly useful as supplying some kind of “epistle of commendation.” Certainly when Dr. J. H. Shakespeare was about to launch the Sustentation Fund a ministerial list which would serve this purpose was essential.

Now the Baptist Union itself was to augment stipends. It must therefore have clear rules as to whose stipends it was to augment. If churches and individuals were to subscribe to a Fund, then they had a right to know on what basis it was to be administered. Rules were inevitable, and, not least, rules regarding what qualified a minister to benefit from the fund. Not surprisingly then, a more precise scheme of ministerial recognition was part and parcel of the radical altering of denominational structure and of the money-making which marked the turn of the century.

In 1896 the Assembly of the Baptist Union set up a Ministerial Recognition Committee. Its prescribed object was

“to prevent the unworthy and unfit from entering our ministry; to assist those whom God has called and qualified for service in the pastorate by commending them to the Churches of the Denomination; and to secure for such pastors, among other privileges, eligibility to participate in the benefits of the Funds of the Union.”

The Committee was instructed

“to receive applications in writing from brethren seeking recognition as Baptist Ministers by the Baptist Union; to determine whether, in their judgment, such brethren have the gifts and graces required in a pastor; to encourage young men who are—evidently called by the Lord to the work of the ministry to secure a collegiate training, and, where this is impracticable, to recommend a course of reading, and generally to assist in preparing them for efficient service.”

The Assembly also resolved that Auxiliary Committees should be formed for the purpose of inquiring into the worthiness and fitness of applicants, and of advising the Central Committee on the question whether their names should be inserted in the list of accredited ministers.

Applicants who had passed through a recognized college had to forward

“a testimonial signed by the President and one Professor, as to their character, studies, and satisfactory completion of their college course,”

also a recommendation from the Local Auxiliary Committee

“as to their character and the efficiency of the pastoral work in which they are engaged.”

Arrangements were made for non-collegiate candidates to sit an examination. There was also for non-collegiate pastors, presumably for those who could not be encouraged to sit the examination, a suggested course of reading. It was definitely stated, however, that the action of the Ministerial Recognition Committee was not retrospective. Obviously when initiating such a scheme there would be a considerable number of ministers whose only training had been in the hard school of experience and who, being pastors of proved ability, could not be excluded from the list. The Committee's eye had to be chiefly on the future.

“The Ministerial Recognition Committee is entrusted with a difficult and delicate task,” said the Handbook. “Only gradually can it fulfil the objects for which it has been brought into existence. Churches are urgently requested not to invite any non-

collegiate candidate to the pastorate until they have communicated with the Committee, and candidates are as urgently asked to safeguard their own interests by seeking the co-operation of the Committee in their attempt to enter the ministry of the Baptist Denomination."

Though the Scheme has been revised a good deal since 1896 and the category of Probationer Minister inserted, the broad outline remains unchanged.

In the last revision, adopted by the Assembly in 1953, the purposes of the Scheme are declared to be :

(a) To encourage candidates for the Baptist Ministry to fit themselves for their vocation by means of suitable courses of study and training, to be undertaken whenever possible in a Baptist College recognized by the Baptist Union.

(b) To accord to those ministers who have so fitted themselves and whose qualifications are approved, the recognition of the Baptist Union, and to commend them to the Churches.

(c) To encourage ministers by all possible means to magnify the ministry and to lay upon themselves the disciplinary ideals of their calling.

(d) To take action in case of conduct unbecoming to the ministry.

(e) To facilitate ministerial settlement.

(f) To meet the requirements of denominational schemes, funds and trusts.

Here the objects are perhaps presented more positively than in 1896, with a greater emphasis on encouraging men to exalt their calling by cultural, moral and spiritual attainments, but clause (f) adds weight to our contention that, all along, one of the main purposes of the list has been the very practical one of defining who may benefit from funds raised by the Union.

This need was emphasized again in 1930 by the inauguration of the Superannuation Fund. Only if a minister's name is on the Accredited (or Probationers') List can he become a member of this fund. If membership were not governed by a rule of this kind it is hard to see how such a fund could be kept actuarially sound. Yet the using of the Accredited List for this purpose clearly tends to emphasize one rule governing accrediting, that concerning age of entry. Unless special provisions are made for the making up of arrears, no pension fund can remain solvent if members are admitted to it when many of what should have been their contributing years have gone by. Excluded from the Superannuation Fund an older applicant for the ministry may have to be, but it does not follow that he must necessarily be excluded from the Accredited List.

## II

The list renders great service in ecclesiastical administration. Governed by carefully compiled rules, it provides the precise definition needed for trust deeds and legal documents as to who are being described by the term "Baptist Ministers." Whether its underlying principles are substantially true to our theological affirmations concerning the ministry is something into which we must now enquire.

The principle which underlies the list and with which we are now chiefly concerned is that, called of God though he must be, no man can become a minister without being approved and commissioned by the Church, and that the Church here means more than the local church or any *ad hoc* group of local churches: the Church here means local churches expressing their fellowship in the Gospel on the widest possible scale, which while denominationalism lasts, means the national denominational authority, the Baptist Union.

That this principle underlying the list is substantially true to what have been our theological affirmations over the centuries becomes clear when we make allowance for the evolution of denominational organization.

Throughout our history there has been much contention for the competence of the local church to order its own affairs under Christ. Yet because Christ is the Lord not only of the local church but of the Universal Church, to discern His will has meant at least seeking advice from representatives of other churches. Decisions of the local church have not then been solely the decisions of an isolated unit. Further, there has always been implied, though sometimes it has not been made as explicit as it should have been, that, in Forsyth's phrase, the local church is but the outcrop of the Great Church. In practice this has given rise to the desire to have the interest and concern of the Great Church embodied in the presence of representatives of other churches on occasions as important as the setting apart of a minister.

For over two hundred and fifty years there have been some men entering the Baptist ministry after college training. The steps that were taken by way of recommendations from churches and ministers before they were admitted to college, to make sure their sense of call was confirmed by the church, was in essence the same as what is done by the Baptist Union today, when the colleges to a large extent act as agents of the Union.

But in the case of men to whom it was not given to enjoy the advantages of college training, for many decades the following practice obtained. The candidate's own church would hear him preach and then commend him to other churches in the vicinity as an occasional preacher. Later some particular church would in-

vite him to preach for a period with a view to the pastorate. Two church meetings were thus being asked formally to pronounce whether the man was, in the words of the recent Report on Ordination, "gifted 'called' and set apart by God for the work of the ministry". But many more churches and their ministers were indirectly involved, for only through their good will could the candidate hope to secure preaching engagements.

With the possible exception of the rare case where a church made one of its own members its pastor, it would seem that throughout our history the local church has not been in the habit of assuming sole responsibility for discerning who were called to the ministry. Though no specific procedure was laid down, by tradition and custom the task was shouldered by local churches and ministers as their representatives, acting in fellowship.

The attempts prior to 1896 to compile a list of ministers for the Handbook may be looked upon as a method, necessarily somewhat fumbling, of declaring to Baptists throughout the country which men had been approved, by churches acting in fellowship, as called of God to the ministry. The requirement introduced in 1869 of recommendations from specified representative persons underlines the need being felt of authorization from churches rather than merely from a church.

Revolutionary though the 1896 Scheme of Ministerial Recognition may at first sight seem, it had many links with previous practice. It was possible because the Baptist Union was now becoming conscious of itself as the denominational authority, the body which could act in the name of most of the Baptist churches in the country.

The scheme as it has been developed is an attempt to register the mind of the Church at different levels concerning a man's calling to the ministry. The local church gives its judgment; the churches of the locality speak through the Association Committee: the Committee of the College, made up of men drawn from an even larger area and elected to serve because they are the representatives of the churches deemed to have special gifts of discernment, makes its decision. These all report to the Central Ministerial Recognition Committee which, if satisfied, recommends to the Baptist Union representing the churches as a whole.

### III

What difficulties does the scheme raise and what objections have been levelled against it? A consideration of difficulties and objections may suggest what future developments ought to be.

The objections appear to centre in the idea that it is more spiritual to proceed in disregard of the scheme. God has issued His call; what the Baptist Union has to say about it is quite im-

material. It may be expedient to comply with the requirements of the Union so as to be eligible for grants or so as to have one's standing enhanced by one's name appearing on an official denominational list but all this is quite incidental to the exercising of an effective Gospel ministry.

In meeting this objection reference might well be made to paragraph 47 of *The Meaning and Practice of Ordination among Baptists* where a definition is given of ordination in terms that are thoroughly "spiritual". In other words here are theological affirmations about divine happenings rather than rules about ecclesiastical administration. Ordination is said to be

"the act, wherein the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, publicly recognizes and confirms that a Christian believer has been gifted, called and set apart by God for the work of the ministry and in the name of Christ commissions him for this work."

The document goes on to call attention to two main points: the Call of God is fundamental, yet ordination is an act of the Church.

There are those who would prefer to speak of ordination as an act of Christ in and through His Church, thus emphasizing still more the "divine happenings". Yet the one way of stating it does not exclude the other. Any service of worship is both an act of the Church and the medium through which Christ acts. But in our view the Report has rightly adopted a form of wording which leaves us in no doubt that the responsibility for this act is laid upon the Church. A decision has to be taken as to whether this believer is a right and proper person to enter the ministry. It is a decision on which much turns with regard to the well-being of the Church. It cannot be taken lightly, yet the Church cannot shrink from the responsibility of taking it. She does so humbly "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit." She may be mistaken. The future may show that this believer who himself was so sure he was called of God to this work was not a suitable person for the ministry. All the Church can say is that she made her decision at the time in good faith, genuinely seeking to discern the Will of God. However saintly any community of Christians may be, it is not given to them to be absolutely sure of the divine will. The Church walks by faith and not by sight even in such a momentous matter as selecting candidates for the ministry. Her task is to discern as clearly as she can which believers have been "gifted, called and set apart by God for the work of the ministry" and in carrying out this task she relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But how may she expect this guidance to be granted to her? She is thrown back on testimonies to the man's ability, recommendations at various levels, interviews, examinations and the record of development under the

discipline of training, for all these are the data to be pondered carefully and prayerfully if the Will of God is to be known. A scheme of ministerial recognition is then implicit in the theological affirmation about how the Lord of the Church grants a ministry to His Body.

There are difficulties in working the scheme which weigh very heavily on the hearts of those who administer it. They concern chiefly the considerable number of pastors of proved ability who either did not apply early enough for recognition or who, having applied, could not pass the academic examinations. It is largely because of these hard cases that the Union "acknowledges that there are others whose names do not appear on the . . . Accredited List who . . . may rightly be designated Baptist ministers."

What can be done to make the Accredited List correspond with the list of pastors of churches in membership with the Union, with the addition of those who are set apart for tasks undertaken on behalf of all the churches?

First there must be on the part of the churches in membership with the Union a definite pledge to assign to the Union the very responsible task of discerning, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which believers have been "gifted, called and set apart by God for the work of the ministry" and of arranging for their training. The day for any group of churches, much less any one local church, to attempt to discharge this task must be declared to be at an end. Membership of the Baptist Union must be understood to involve such an undertaking regarding the ministry.

The voluntary society aspect of the Baptist Union will have to give way to an explicit statement of what we have increasingly recognized it to be, the means by which local Baptist churches express their interdependency one upon the other and show themselves to be part of the greater fellowship which all churches share in Christ. The Union will have to be conceived as Baptist churches in covenant relationship with each other in Christ.

After due preparation, the member churches will have to be invited to covenant with one another before God to act through their appointed representatives as one body in certain tasks which, society being as complex as it is today, can no longer be handled by a local church or the churches of a small area. High up on the list of this task is commissioning to the ministry. It will be of extreme importance that the churches shall understand they are not handing over these functions to some outside body but assigning them to the greater whole of which they form part. The step will thus be in line with the traditions of the past and the gradual evolution of policy.

From 1896 we have been trying to exalt the minister's calling by making regulations with which the minister must comply. We

can get no further till we make corresponding demands upon the churches. Attempts have been made to persuade churches to abide by the scheme and the response has been considerable, but only when a grant is at stake are they compelled to take the scheme seriously. The financial sanction is not a fitting instrument in the Church of Christ. It is far worthier to ask the churches freely to assign the authority needed. Until the churches limit their freedom of action as accredited ministers have long since done, it is hard to see any way forward.

Covenanting on behalf of the churches as just outlined will carry with it a pledge on the part of all who feel called of God to serve as ministers to have their call approved by the Union, whether they be full-time or part-time pastors. Just as in 1896 many concessions were made in the accrediting of those already serving, so would it have to be when by covenanting the churches solve the present anomalies.

We envisage a number of sections in the Accredited List which would then be compiled. In addition to the present categories there would be one for part-time pastors, and another for full-time pastors who have given proof of their ability for the day-to-day work in certain churches but to whom academic tests of the standard at present demanded for the list are too exacting.

The cultural requirements for these last two categories would be fixed as high as practicable so that an educated ministry could be assured, but prescribed reading and essays would have to be offered as an alternative to the examination method of testing attainment. No church would be prevented from calling such a pastor but the appearance of this name in that section of the list should be a reminder to them that the spheres in which he is judged capable to minister are of a special kind.

The aim would be that within a limited period of years from the time the churches made this covenant every minister would appear on the Accredited List. Thereafter no persons would be assuming pastoral office in churches in membership with the Union without first having been tested as to their gifts and calling and directed as to their training by the whole fellowship of churches acting through their Ministerial Recognition Committee.

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