



*incorporating the Transactions of the*  
**BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

## EDITORIAL

**T**HE Northern Baptist Association is to be congratulated upon its initiative in the production of a Report entitled "The Way Forward". The terms of reference were that: "The N.B.A. should commence a serious enquiry into our Baptist form of Church polity." This the members of the Commission have sought to do in three main sections, Church Polity in the New Testament, The Baptist Movement (a historical sketch), and Our Baptist Faith. The effort is to be commended, although whether all will agree with the conclusions reached or, indeed, with the way in which the evidence of the New Testament and the The Baptist Movement is selected and presented, is quite another matter. Space does not permit a full review of the Report here, therefore critical comment on matters of detail would be unfair. The conclusion on the matter of polity, however, is clearly illustrated by the following quotation. "It would appear that today there is urgent need for individual churches to acknowledge that in certain matters their own wishes should be subject to the approval of a higher authority, competent to consider individual proposals in the wider setting of Denominational needs and resources." One would want to add that this is all very humanly speaking. The limitation of the decisions of Church meetings is shown to work out, for example,

in the suggestion that plans for church extension should receive Association consideration and approval before being implemented. A further suggestion is that, although the present machinery for the appointment of ministers is considered to be generally satisfactory, before a church issues an invitation the proposal should be submitted to the Association for approval. Whilst the former proposal has somewhat to commend it, this latter proposal, apart from any theological considerations, bristles with many practical difficulties, and could, in fact, result in the undermining of the ever increasing respect in which the General Superintendents are held. That the local church should work with the General Superintendent in seeking a minister is most desirable—indeed we would say, entirely necessary—but that the invitation to the pastorate issued as a result of the General Superintendent's co-operation, should then be subject to the approval of the Association is a much more doubtful proposition. If this suggestion is put forward to counteract any ignoring of the General Superintendent one can sympathise with the motive, but, if this is so, it is scarcely right to lay down a principle, generally to be applied, solely to safeguard occasional abuses of the existing machinery. And supposing the Association does not approve of a church's invitation—what is the position then?

There is, however, one other point which needs to be borne in mind in discussing this matter, and that is the place of the Church meeting within our Baptist life. As we have read this interesting Report, the feeling has been borne in on us that the Church meeting has almost been written of in despair. As though the Church meeting is the centre and core of an independency which issues in an isolationist policy clean contrary to the New Testament and to Baptist History. The independency reflected in a Christ directed Church meeting will certainly not be isolationism. The two words are not synonymous. If the Church meeting is to be taken seriously, then the argument of the Report seems to be that each Church meeting should recognise that it is the will of the Head of the Church that ultimate authority in certain matters should, as a point of general polity, be delegated to the Association. The Church meeting would retain the privilege of seeking the will of Christ in calling a minister, but the Association must, as it were, seek confirmation from Christ that this is so. Perhaps putting the matter like this pin-points the impression that the Report seems to concentrate over much on the manward aspect. We are told: "The individual Baptist church is at present its own authority in all matters relating to the life of the church. Through the Church meeting it governs itself, it calls its minister and it determines its relation with other Churches, the Association and

the Baptist Union." Now this is surely somewhat out of perspective. The emphasis in the Church meeting is not that of a self governing company; it is of a company of believers seeking that Christ should govern through the Holy Spirit. The individual Baptist church is *not* its own authority. It stands under the highest authority—that of Christ. Some may say: "But this is all right in theory, but what happens in practice?" Now, if it is argued that the Church meeting, the fellowship of believers met around the Word, needs reviving no one could dissent. But is the answer to the problem of today immediately to change the polity as suggested here? Is it not rather to revive the Church meetings, which is, admittedly, a much more difficult task, for it means, in fact, reviving the spiritual understanding of the Faith as practiced by Baptists? We would dare to suggest that the situation with which the N.B.A. is faced in practice, has arisen primarily because of a neglect in the education of both potential and actual church members in the true Baptist conception of the local church as a fellowship of committed and responsible believers, which is, in turn, part of the wider Church. The neglect of such teaching has had the result of producing churches of church attenders rather than of totally committed church members. The root cause of today's situation is a breakdown of an understanding of church membership in a Baptist church. This is a failure at a level much deeper than that of polity. It is a failure to recognise the authority of Christ in His Church (both in its local and universal aspects) and therefore in His ministry, through His chosen ministers. The solution of our problems lies first at this deeper level. It is here we must begin. Then, in the light of a revived Church and Church meeting we can, if we are led, look again at the matter of authority in Church polity. Such a solution is not crying for the moon, it is praying for the Holy Spirit.