

FOR HE IS OUR PEACE

BAPTIST RESPONSIBILITIES IN BRITISH-ARGENTINIAN RECONCILIATION

In July of 1984, a group of thirty-five young British Baptists became the first large British Church group to visit Argentina after the 1982 war over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands. The occasion was the 10th Baptist Youth World Conference, held in Buenos Aires, but the concern of all the British delegates was for reconciliation with Argentina. Two years on from the war, the emotional and physical scars of the combatants and their families were still painful; the Governments of Britain and Argentina had made no progress towards a negotiated settlement of the problem which gave rise to the war; and many links between our countries remained severed. How had we got into this situation, and what could be done about it?

Since the 16th century, the sovereignty of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands has been the subject of dispute. In 1843, the Islands became a Crown Colony of the British Empire. In December of 1965, United Nations Assembly resolution 2065 (XX) referred to 'the cherished aim of bringing to an end everywhere colonialism in all its forms, one of which covers the case of the Falklands Islands (Malvinas)'. The resolution invited the Governments of Britain and Argentina to 'proceed without delay, with negotiations with a view to finding a peaceful solution to the problem'. In December 1973, Resolution 3160 (XXVIII) expressed itself 'gravely concerned at the fact that eight years have elapsed since the adoption of resolution 2065 (XX) without any substantial progress having been made in the negotiations', and 'urges the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom, therefore to proceed without delay with the negotiations, in accordance with the provisions of the relevant resolution of the General Assembly, in order to put an end to the colonial situation'.

In April of 1982, the Argentinian military Junta took military action to occupy the Falklands/Malvinas Islands, and the clouds of war gathered over the South Atlantic. In the shadow of this ominously developing situation, the Baptist Union Assembly was meeting in London and passed the following resolution:

The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland meeting in Assembly in London on 28th April 1982

views with grave concern the international crisis created by the invasion by Argentine forces of the Falkland Islands.

sympathises with H. M. Government in the dilemma in which it now finds itself

pledges its prayers that divine guidance may be given to the leaders of the nations involved, that peace with justice may prevail,

commends that continuing efforts be made to seek a peaceful solution to the problem including the implementation of resolution 502 of the U.N. Security Council which calls for the

cessation of hostilities, the immediate withdrawal of all Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands and a diplomatic solution to the problem, and,

urges, with the withdrawal of all Argentine forces, the non-engagement of the British Task Force and the devolving of responsibility upon the United Nations until such time as a durable peace settlement can be reached.¹

Several weeks later, with the loss of several hundred lives and many more wounded, and at enormous economic cost, the British military forces were victorious and the Argentines surrendered. These events then led to the rapid disintegration of the military Junta and the return to democratic Government in Argentina. For Argentina, its internal realities had come home to roost through its military adventure. In Britain, we have been left with the euphoric hangover of imperial echoes. In her speech at a Conservative Rally at Cheltenham Racecourse on 13th July 1982, the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, declared that people were wrong to have thought that 'Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world... Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won'.

How, then, to work for reconciliation? The visit of young British Baptists to their sisters and brothers in Argentina was a step on the path of reconciliation, for it is to this ministry that we are called as Christians. The Apostle Paul speaks in II Corinthians of us 'being given a 'ministry of reconciliation', the aim of which is to bring into being 'a new creation'. This is the breadth of the Christian hope towards which our activity of reconciliation is directed. Contrary to the erroneous paraphrase of the *Living Bible*, and the interpretation held in the minds of many Christians, reconciliation in the Biblical sense is not simply about becoming 'a brand new person inside'. It is not only something between God and individuals, or between individuals and other individuals, but it is also to be worked out in the divisions of race, class, and country. The vision of Revelation speaks of the leaves of the Tree of Life as being for 'the healing of the nations'. There is, then, a specifically Christian responsibility for reconciliation, and it was in that conviction that we went to Buenos Aires. But having been there as a group of Baptist Christians, we now believe that there is a particular Baptist responsibility to work for reconciliation between Britain and Argentina, by building on what has already been begun through the visit of our group and the earlier work of the General Secretary of the Baptist Union.

Whilst we were in Buenos Aires, we were able to share with Argentinian Baptist Christians in worship and prayer; in sport; around the meal table; in practical service; and in hard discussion and debate. It was out of such a day of discussion and debate that a joint statement of British and Argentinian Baptist youth emerged. I believe that it is this statement which could provide the basis for our reflection on Baptist responsibilities for reconciliation between Britain and Argentina. This is because the statement is not the product of one party to the issue putting forward what it sees as the way ahead, which

would be an unsatisfactory basis for reconciliation - especially if it came from the more powerful and victorious side of the conflict. For Christians, Jesus gave the promise that 'the Spirit will lead you into all truth' - and the 'you' is a plural 'you', it is 'you together' into all truth.

The discussion took place during the whole day of 17th July at the Central Baptist Church in Buenos Aires. In the morning we had some input from Pastor Arnoldo Canclini, an Argentinian Baptist historian, specialising in the question of the islands. Pastor Canclini gave a presentation of the Argentinian viewpoint of the issue, and in the afternoon I gave a paper on 'The Christian Ministry of Reconciliation After the Falklands/Malvinas War'. The rest of the day was spent in small group discussions, tackling the issues arising from the presentations. Throughout the day, a small commission was also at work on the draft of a joint statement which was then discussed in plenary and finally amended for approval. This was a discussion which involved a full spectrum of British opinion on the Islands, all the way from those who supported the official position of the British Government through to those who saw it as an unjust imperialist war, with many shades of opinion in between. Amongst the Argentinians, there were young conscripts present who had fought on the islands and had seen friends killed before their eyes. The statement which emerged, therefore, was a costly expression of the pain and hope we shared on that day.

'We share a common sorrow about the failure of our Governments to reach agreement over the future of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands; the loss of life which resulted from this failure; and the continuing tensions which divide our countries. As Christians we recognise that these things are an expression of the sinful humanity in which we share'. The starting point for all conflict-resolution must be that no party has moral perfection. The Christian community above all should recognise the common sin in which we share. Nationalisms may exalt the nation right or wrong, but Christians can have no part in that attitude. A sober repentance and a sensitive awareness of the human costs of war must always be uppermost in our considerations. The critical judgment of the coming Kingdom of God bears upon all our temporal actions in an imperfect world. But reconciliation is still something which has to take place in the real world or not at all. The horrible realities of war in the destruction of human life confront us with the realities of the world as it is and not the world as we would like it to be. And it is precisely within this world that we are called upon to exercise our ministry of reconciliation.

'We know that there are no easy solutions to the problems that divide us, and we recognise that coming from different backgrounds we have different understandings. But as Christians we also share together in the grace of God which is the foundation of our unity, and we hold to the Biblical understanding of reconciliation which involves repentance and justice as the basis of peace'. Our oneness in sinful humanity leads to our divisions of history and social setting, and our discussions with Argentinian Christians pointed up for us just how much we are all conditioned by our national history and outlook. Argentina is an emerging nation which has memories of a recent

struggle for national independence from colonial powers, whereas Britain has been a coloniser with an imperialist history. The ways of looking at the world which arise from these differences are real and very acute, and reconciliation will not be achieved without taking full account of this. But at the same time, the Christian community does provide a real transnational point of unity. The growing consciousness of the worldwide Church has begun to deliver Churches from uncritical legitimisation of everything their countries do. During the conflict the Pope brought together the British and Argentinian cardinals in the kiss of peace - an act of prophetic symbolism which testified to a dimension of reality beyond the fighting. And during the war Professor Jose Miguez Bonino, an Argentinian Methodist liberation theologian and a President of the World Council of Churches was present in Britain at the British Council of Churches Spring Bank Holiday Conference. I remember the eucharist there at which I exchanged the peace with him. This kind of oneness is real. But it is real because it does not gloss over the differences and the conflict in a euphoric haze of cheap peace and love. It is not an emotional experience which replaces the necessity for hard work on the practical proposals for reconciliation, but rather, it provides the basis for truly facing the differences and the conflict and starting from a recognition of these, since reconciliation cannot be a papering over of the cracks. It is also crucial that reconciliation must be built on justice. Too often the word 'reconciliation' is used by the powerful as a means of maintaining an unjust situation. But this is the false prophecy of saying 'peace, peace, where there is no peace'. In addition, grace is not cheap grace. Although it brings forgiveness for the past, it also calls for actions of repentance leading to the fruit of justice. In this connection, we in Britain ought to recognise that it is only as countries like our own acknowledge our history of imperialism and colonialism and reorientate our role in the world community from one of dangerous nostalgia to one of sober reality, that international reconciliation can have a chance of being born. Argentina, too, discovered that issues of justice would not just vanish away, and its lack of internal reconciliation burst to the surface following the military defeat of the Junta. The Mothers of the Disappeared continued their silent vigils in the Plaza del Mayo throughout the 1982 war.

'Inspired by God's initiative of reconciliation in Jesus Christ our Lord, we feel impelled to make progress along the paths of reconciliation. We therefore commit ourselves to strengthen the links between our Churches by encouraging (a) the twinning of local congregations (b) future exchanges of Argentinian and British Christians (c) mutually agreed days of prayer for reconciliation'. The Christian ministry of reconciliation is for this world, and at numerous points it overlaps and needs to enter into alliances with the work for reconciliation undertaken by others. But if we are to be true to our identity, then we always undertake such work in the light of the Christian Gospel, drawing upon the resources of the Christian community. This means that our ministry of reconciliation begins with the pattern of life left to us by Jesus, and this is a pattern of reconciliation which involved costly risk-taking. The incarnation itself was God taking human risk upon Himself even to the cost of the cross. His action is the ground and inspiration for our action. And yet we must begin by being faithful in little things. For this reason, the statement first of all addresses the Christian community. We cannot call

on others to do what we ourselves are not prepared to put ourselves out to do. And although the proposals may only seem to be small steps, the resources of the Christian community are, in fact, of immense significance. One of the almost unique things about the Christian Church is that it has significant membership in every region of the world - North, South, East and West, and whilst these Churches might not be able to agree on how they see things from their different global perspectives, at the very least they have a degree of unity which provides for channels of communication which might not otherwise be there at all. At the time of writing, there are no formal diplomatic relations between Britain and Argentina. In this context, international Church relations are vital for keeping the lines open. And local churches can participate in this. To some extent these twinning contacts can be sustained by letter-writing and card-sending, and this has been taken up by a number of churches in relation to British-Argentinian Church contacts. But there is no substitute for personal meeting, and so it is proposed that future exchanges take place. But for this to be enabled to happen, the weakness of the Argentinian peso means that British Christian financial help will be needed for Argentinians to come here. In fact in November of 1984, a delegation from the Argentinian Consultative Council of Churches came to Britain for the Assembly of the British Council of Churches. They were also accompanied by Pastor Arnoldo Canclini, and he was able to meet again with our delegates at a reunion weekend in Malvern where it was planned to bring over a group of three Argentinian Baptist youth together with a leader. The finance for this will be met by some of the money left over from the group costs of our trip, together with money to be raised by British Baptist youth. It is hoped that this visit will take place later this year or early in 1986. But twinning and exchanges will only directly involve some Baptists, although they will strengthen and inform something that all can participate in - the ministry of intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is at the root of the Christian ministry of reconciliation. It promotes interest and concern across human barriers. It helps us to see others as God sees them instead of from our own very limited human perspective. Twinning, exchanges and prayer can be a total process in which we can all share, and through the various strands of fellowship and informed prayer which are thereby created, contribute to the building up of 'the bonds of peace'.

'In this spirit of reconciliation we call upon our peoples to make every effort to increase cultural, social and political exchange'. Having advocated that we begin with what we ourselves can do as Christians, it then seems the next most practical step to concentrate on what we can encourage our peoples to do. Our Governments may not yet be ready to take many steps, but they never will unless people from the two countries meet at all sorts of levels and create the right atmosphere for Governmental negotiations. Such meeting is necessary in order to break down the false labelling and stereotyping which we were subjected to by our media during the war. For those who have met Argentinians, the popular press's denial of their humanity as 'Argies' is unacceptable and destructive. Sport, the arts, tourism, etc., can all be encouraged as a means of rebuilding human contacts. And since politics is something for all citizens and not just for a professional elite, various political groupings can begin to take initiatives. In this connection the role of the South Atlantic Council

(who were very supportive of our visit) can be a helpful one.

'We welcome the democratic Government in Argentina as an opportunity to explore new areas of negotiation over the future of the islands'. The recognition of a changed situation within Argentina is an important factor as a prelude to the resumption of Government to Government contact. Although it seems to me that our Government was being hypocritical when it presented itself as the defender of the freedoms of the islanders (since we had sustained the brutal Argentinian regime with arms supplies and had demoted the citizenship of the islanders to a second-class status in the 1981 British Nationality Act), I think it would also be true to say that popular British opinion is anti-fascist and would not have wished to see the islands taken over militarily by a blood-stained regime. But the new factor of a democratic Government in Argentina should have provided the necessary 'break' with the past military Government who led the invasion adventure, and so provide the necessary diplomatic 'space' for the resumption of negotiations over the future of the islands. Of course, it could with some justification be pointed out that Argentinian history hardly gives grounds for hoping in the continued stability of its democracy. And yet, ironically, those who invoke this argument need to realise that a failure to make progress on the issue of the islands could be a major contributory factor to any attempted destabilisation of the restored democracy.

'Just as we have enjoyed direct personal contact, we would encourage our Governments to have direct communication, and to make a commitment to seek progress within the framework of the United Nations'. The role of the United Nations is often treated with cynicism by Britain. Yet if our Government is genuine in its commitment to the resolution of international disputes by diplomatic means, then the United Nations forum must be utilised. Given the different histories of the countries, the wounds of the conflict, and the entrenched positions forced by the war and its aftermath, it seems that the only possibility of progress will be for the two parties to meet in a wider context than that of their own relations. Meeting in a wider context can help the parties to see things differently as no one else within the United Nations sees things exactly as Britain and Argentina do, however much they may take one side or the other in the dispute. Indeed, with regard to the role of the United Nations, it must be said that the international crisis of the war was not only 'created by the invasion by Argentine forces of the Falkland Islands' as the Baptist Union Assembly statement said at the time of the war, but also by the continual stalling of successive British Governments during the years of negotiations since 1965. In this sense, the Letter from the Consultative Council of Churches in Argentina to Friends and Brothers of the Ecumenical Family of 29th April 1982 was more faithful to the truth of the situation when it stated: 'We have deplored the fact that the road to a peaceful solution of the dispute has been destroyed by the improper conduct of the British Government during the years of negotiations with our country, and by the surprise action of the Argentine armed forces.'² The offices of the United Nations must be utilised, but because of past experience, some indication of genuine commitment to resolution through negotiation must be given by the British Government, in view of Argentina's past experience of the decolonisation talks.

'We believe that the problems between our two countries must be seen within the global context of a search for a new international economic order'. Argentinian-British relations and the question of the islands do not live in a vacuum. They take place within a very specific international context which affects the substance of those relations. To many of us who visited Argentina, it seemed that the islands had a symbolic quality beyond their physical actuality. Very few Argentinians seemed to want to live there if they came under Argentinian sovereignty, but many were still prepared to die for them. Why? Because the relations of North and South are involved, both in the historical aspects of imperialism and colonialism, and in the contemporary form of the rules of the game in international finance. The role of the International Monetary Fund, the raging inflation in Argentina, and the refusal of Britain and the USA in particular to countenance any reform of the international trading system, inevitably produce both internal instability and resentment of the powerful. For these reasons the islands cannot be isolated as an issue to be dealt with in and of themselves. They are integrally related to the wider issues in which we participate.

'Having taken seriously our national concerns, we also affirm that our ultimate hope is in the Kingdom of God which will come through Jesus Christ who is the truth, our faith, our commitment, our peace'. We live in the present and in an embodied world. In such a world our national concerns are real and cannot be dissolved into a kind of vague, sentimental Christian internationalism. At the same time, as Christians we recognise that all our national concerns and perspectives are relative and we seek to bring them under the perspective of the Kingdom which has not yet arrived. But it is our common hope in the coming of that Kingdom that enables us to strive for a foretaste of it in the reconciliation between our countries. But that foretaste will depend upon the elements which made up the motto of the 10th Baptist World Youth Conference - truth, faith, and commitment, which can lead to the possibility of peace.

In closing this reflection on Baptist responsibilities in the area of reconciliation between Britain and Argentina, it seems to me to be important to remind ourselves of the words of the Apostle Paul from Romans 8 which were read at our meeting at the Central Baptist Church in Buenos Aires: 'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words... I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us... because the creation itself will one day be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God!'

It is with this hope, and in this prayer, that we can work for reconciliation.

NOTES

- 1 Baptist Union Assembly Statement taken from the *Baptist Union Directory 1982-3*.
- 2 UN Resolutions and Argentinian Consultative Council of Churches Letter taken from *Conflict in the South Atlantic: Documents on the*

Falklands/Malvinas Crisis, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, World Council of Churches, 1983.

PAUL G. WELLER

GERMAN BAPTIST HISTORY

In our last issue, mention was made in the editorial of the desirability of greater awareness of continental Baptist history, and of the need for more contacts between British Baptist historians and those across the North Sea. Mr F. M. W. Harrison reports that for the past few years he has been engaged in the study and translation of a number of works of recent German Baptist historiography. He has translated Günter Bladers's *Theurer Bruder Oncken* (a new, illustrated life of Johann Gerhard Oncken, the founder of the German Baptists) and *Dem Herr Vertrauen*, the largely autobiographical account of Eduard Scheve, one of the second generation Baptist leaders who was mainly responsible for founding the Cameroons Mission and the German Baptist deaconness movement. Copies of these translations have been placed with the Baptist Union Library (now of course being transferred to Regent's Park College, Oxford), and Mr Harrison has of course retained copies himself. He wishes that these translations should be available for use by researchers.

Mr Harrison is also working on Wiard Popkes's *Gemeinde, Raum des Vertrauens* and the book published on the 150th anniversary of the German Baptists last year *Ein Herr, Ein Glaube, Eine Taufe* which is particularly significant in its treatment of the German Baptists during the Hitler period.

Any enquiries relating to these works may be addressed to Mr F. M. W. Harrison, M.Phil., B.D., 20 Valley Drive, Newthorpe, Notts, NG16 2DT.

QUARTERLY PRODUCTION

This issue is the first to be produced using the Society's new IBM electronic typewriter. The Committee has known that members have been unhappy with the recent mode of production, and hopes the new format will prove more acceptable.

Since preparing this issue, a diskette module has been added, which gives word-processing facility with unlimited memory. This should eliminate the occasionally noticeable corrections still apparent here. It will also facilitate 'in house' preparation of other publications.

The Committee decided in faith that it was right to purchase really good equipment, which has cost over £2000. Readers will appreciate that this is a considerable investment for a Society of five hundred members. In the long term it will help to contain the cost of the Society's publications. Members who welcome the change may wish to send a thankoffering to the Treasurer, Revd T. S. H. Elwyn, 148 Greenvale Road, Eltham, SE9 1PQ.